

A Christian Model of Belief Formation and

Its Implications for Christian Apologetics

by

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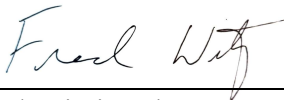
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**Joe Gerber**

**Kairos University**

**Doctor of Theology**

**March 2024**

**Dedicated to my wife, Heidi Gerber, whose steadfast, undeserved love is the strongest defense of the gospel I know.**

## Contents

### Chapter 1: Introduction

Section 1: What is Apologetics?.....	6
Section 2: A Need for More Than a Hunch.....	7
Section 3: The Power of a Christian Model of Belief Formation.....	11
Section 4: Implications and Questions.....	12

### Chapter 2: Contemporary Apologetics and the Limits of Logic

Section 1: A Brief History of Christian Apologetics.....	14
The Scriptures on Apologetics.....	14
Two Important Qualifiers.....	17
The Historical Record.....	20
Section 2: The Epistemological Limits of Logic.....	25
Section 3: The Physiological Limits of Logic.....	27

### Chapter 3: A Holistic, Christian Model of Belief Formation

Section 1: Can a Model of Belief Formation Ever Be Christian?.....	30
God's Sovereignty and Human Free Will.....	30
The Use of Psychology.....	31
Section 2: Component 1 – Timing.....	37
Section 3: Component 2 – Key Relationships.....	41
Section 4: Component 3 – Formative Experiences.....	45
Section 5: Component 4 – Desirability of Belief.....	48
Section 6: Component 5 – Strength of Argument/Evidence for the Belief.....	52

### Chapter 4: Spiritual Realities – The Component that Encircles All Components

Section 1: Introduction.....	56
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## Contents (cont'd)

Section 2: Mount Carmel and Mars Hill.....	57
Section 3: A Biblical Synthesis.....	59
Section 4: The Lack of a Modern Historical Synthesis.....	61
Chapter 5: Implications of the Model for Apologetics	
Section 1: Introduction.....	65
Section 2: Implications of the Model	
Timing.....	66
Key Relationships.....	67
Formative Experiences.....	70
Desirability of Belief.....	76
Strength of Argument/Evidence for the Belief.....	80
Spiritual Realities and the Power of Prayer.....	85
Chapter 6: Future Research Needed	
Component Coefficients and Dynamics.....	94
Personality Type.....	97
Belief Type .....	98
Cross-cultural Applicability.....	98
Age and Generation.....	99
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	101
Bibliography.....	106
Appendix: Resources on Various Approaches to Apologetics.....	117

## Contents (cont'd)

### List of Visuals

A Christian Model of Belief Formation.....	36
A Christian Model of Belief Formation with Spiritual Realities & Prayer.....	56
Various Belief Dynamics Possibilities.....	95-96

## Chapter 1 - Introduction

### Section 1: What is Apologetics?

What exactly is Christian apologetics, and is it effective? These are profoundly important questions as the Western world moves deeper into a post-Christian reality (Nadeem, 2022). While global demographic trends suggest that Christianity will continue to grow worldwide (and remarkably fast in some areas), in the parts of the world that have been most impacted by the Enlightenment and the consequent scientific naturalism, institutional and orthodox Christian faith continues to decline significantly (Earls, 2022). This is where Christian apologetics comes in.

Christian apologetics, popularly defined, refers to a subsection of Christian philosophy and/or theology that seeks to provide compelling reasons to believe the truth claims of Christianity and to defend Christianity against charges of being false. It is distinguished from evangelism (at least in the purest sense of the word) in that evangelism assumes the truth of Christianity as the gospel is being communicated whereas apologetics seeks to establish and defend the truth of Christianity (Augustine, n.d.). Admittedly, the lines are not clear. Indeed, it is often said that good apologetics cannot avoid being evangelistic and that good evangelism cannot avoid being apologetical; there is an unavoidable synergy between the two, and it makes precise definitions tricky. But to the general Christian layperson who has heard of apologetics (many have not), the safe assumption is that they perceive it to be philosophers, theologians, and maybe historians seeking to “prove” Christianity is true. As apologist William Lane Craig describes it, “Apologetics is that branch of Christian theology which is devoted to providing a rational justification for Christianity’s truth claims...It is a theoretical discipline which studies the arguments and the evidence for the truth of the Christian faith” (Craig, 2012). In the first section of Chapter 2, I will offer a brief history of apologetics that reveals how this perception developed over time, including a look at how apologetics was understood in its most primitive form in the New Testament.

But the modern perception of apologetics is slowly changing. Within the current world of Christian scholarship, there is growing debate surrounding a proper definition of apologetics, including the best apologetic methods and approaches that flow out of that understanding. I have included a book list in Appendix 1 that represents the various approaches. As the cultural landscape changes in the West, there is renewed debate between the various “schools” of apologetics, including some new ones (Boa & Bowman, 2005). In the last two sections of Chapter 2, I will explain why this debate is incredibly healthy and vital, particularly when one looks at how the Bible describes what apologetics is and is not.

Slow change notwithstanding, it remains to be true that virtually all “flavors” of contemporary apologetics assume that the primary way to establish and defend the truth of Christianity is through logic, argumentation, and reason (Morley, 2015). However, a small but growing number of Christian apologists, both Protestant and Catholic (Nelson, 2022), are pushing beyond these traditional definitions and exploring new ways to establish and defend the truth of Christianity. The shift is away from viewing apologetics as a primarily cerebral exercise in argumentation, debates, and propositions to a more holistic approach that includes appeals to the human imagination (Ordway, 2017), a person’s experience (Williams, 2011), and even the existence of beauty (Ortlund, 2021), among other things. Admittedly, this broader perspective on Christian apologetics is in a fairly nascent phase, and the predominant approach to apologetics is still anchored heavily in logic and reason. But the movement is slowly growing and, in time, may become a significant influence on how Christians practice the discipline of apologetics. The motivation for this dissertation is to contribute research that helps affirm the validity and necessity of this movement.

## **Section 2: A Need for More Than a Hunch**

My personal interest in developing a more holistic approach to apologetics has emerged over the past 25 years as I have learned and practiced apologetics. I did not become a Christian due to the influence of apologetics (I did not actually know apologetics existed at the time), but it has been one of



the more formative dynamics in helping me to grow and mature in Christ. Countless times I have been wrestling with a vexing question or theological problem only to have an apologetics resource give me just the perspective I needed to keep moving forward. But I have also noticed over the years that other believers asking the very same questions are not fully satisfied with the answers that completely satisfied me. I have also observed that the same arguments for God's existence that seem airtight and convincing to me can fairly easily be shrugged off by unbelievers. This has generated an important question in my mind, "Why does the same logical argument with the same information and reasoning convince some people (like me) but not everyone?" I have observed this incongruence time and time again. I began to have a hunch that it takes more than good arguments, more than sound reasoning, more than logical proof, to compel someone to believe something. My experience and observation began to convince me that people do not form their beliefs based on reason and rationality alone. There must be more to it. Figuring out this question was the initial impulse behind my enrollment in the ThD program at Evangelical Theology Seminary (now a part of Kairos University).

This dissertation is centered on developing a Christian perspective on what I am calling "belief formation." The Christian model of belief formation model that I have developed is an interdisciplinary approach that integrates areas of scholarship such as the psychology of belief (Kim, 2023), belief dynamics (Galesic, 2021), sociology (Gunnøe, 2022), and theology (Johnson, 2010), among others, to answer the question: How do people *really* come to believe what they believe or to change what they believe? I will explain the model in great detail in Chapter 3. And because this is a Christian model of belief formation, it must necessarily include a serious discussion about the important role that unseen spiritual realities play in forming what a person believes. This dynamic is often overlooked in contemporary apologetics material, even if a brief mention appears from time to time. To ensure that my model does not make the same mistake, I devote the entirety of Chapter 4 to this important component of belief formation and use a significant portion of Chapter 5 to discuss prayer.

The need for a robust, Christian model of belief formation can be seen in the works of authors who advocate for the more “holistic approach” to apologetics mentioned above. In these works, there is a conspicuous absence of such a robust model. Rather, the authors often assume that apologetics needs to be more well-rounded and then proceed accordingly. A few examples are below. The first is from *Our Deepest Desires: How the Christian Story Fulfills Human Aspirations* by Gregory Ganssle:

The assumptions by which we navigate our lives include more than what we believe. They include our desires or our loves. It is not only what I think is true that will affect how I pursue the best life. It is also what I most want. What kind of person do I want to be? That question reveals my deeper desires.

It is important for me to make it clear that I shall not argue that Christianity is true. I believe it is true, but for most people, the question of whether it is true is not the most important question. My suspicion is that there are many people who think something like the following: ‘I am pretty sure that Christianity is not true, and it is a good thing that it is not.’ I want to challenge the second part of this thought. (Ganssle, 2017, p. 12)

Notice how Ganssle says, “My suspicion is that...” In other words, he has a hunch (similar to me) that the attractiveness of a belief may be just as important a factor to whether someone believes it or not as whether the belief is perceived to be true. Unfortunately, Ganssle does not provide in the book any reasons or support that his suspicion is true other than philosophical speculation. A Christian model of belief formation model can help verify or even disprove Ganssle’s hunch in some way.

Another example is from James Sire’s book *Apologetics Beyond Reason: Why Seeing Really Is Believing*. He writes:

As the brief history of apologetics suggests and the flow of my own changing mind shows, apologetics is messy. Our multicultural world has formed us in diverse ways. We are eclectic—each of us a bit of this, a bit of that—but still one unique person. We live together with deep differences. Our lives are not under the control of the intellect alone. Feeling and desiring fuel who we are, what we value and how we behave. We are a messy people, a fallen people, and that messy fallenness poses a challenge to those who engage in apologetics. (Sire, 2014, p. 21)

In this selection, Sire says, “Our lives are not under the control of the intellect alone.” I would wholeheartedly agree. But nowhere in the book does Sire demonstrate this is true. He simply assumes that it is true and then keeps moving. He then goes on to suggest that there are realities beyond the

intellect that shape what a person believes, things such as imagination, literature, poetry, and so forth.

But, again, nowhere does he provide an explanation of why these things help shape what a person believes. A belief formation model can help explain why or why not.

Finally, there is Myron B. Penner in his book *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context*. In this book, Penner makes the remarkable suggestion that rational, cerebral apologetics is completely unhelpful to advancing belief in Christianity. In fact, he argues that it actually hurts. He writes:

The hypothesis I wish to put forward is that the current apologetic debates—over the “rational foundations” of Christian theism or faith, reasons or evidences for faith in general, the sensational debates over “the New Atheism,” or evolution vs. creation—all share a similar fragmentary nature that produces the same interminable lack of consensus in moral discourse. They are also subject to a similar misfortune with respect to what we might call their conceptual grammar—that is, the language and ideas they employ. When we use the language and arguments of ancient and medieval Christianity today, not only are the issues under contention significantly different, but the language and arguments themselves have actually been transformed from their original discourse. So it is that many attempts to articulate the reasonableness of Christian faith in our context paradoxically end up doing something different than defending genuine Christianity.... John Stackhouse issues a timely admonition in his helpful book *Humble Apologetics*. Acknowledging Christians often lack a desirable humility regarding their convictions and realizing they are frequently prone to overestimate the rational warrant for their beliefs, Stackhouse warns that apologetics can be both blessing and curse. Defending Christian belief is not an unqualified good; it may actually be counterproductive to faith. There are times and ways in which a given ‘defense’ of the faith does more harm than good to the cause of Christ...Stackhouse certainly points us in the right direction, but my unsettling proposition above forces us to radicalize his conclusion: not only can apologetics curse; it actually *is* a curse. (Penner, 2013, pp. 8-9)

Penner makes this radical claim based on his adherence to the views of Soren Kierkegaard.

According to Kierkegaard, faith does not have logic, reason, and rationality (Kierkegaard, 2014).

Therefore, faith requires a “leap of faith” such that a person trusts in something despite the lack of logic, reason, and rationality. Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith” requires one to figuratively leap over the emotional and psychological boundaries of logic and reason to trust in whatever the thing is. One can see, then, why on Kierkegaard’s view (and Penner’s view), apologetics would actually be harmful.

But do Penner's negative claims hold up under the question, "Is it true that people *really* do not form their beliefs using any elements of modernity?" Just like the other previously mentioned authors who question (but do not fully reject as Penner does) the sufficiency of traditional apologetics, Penner is open to the accusation that he is making assumptions and intuitions about why people do or do not believe Christianity without having a model to back it up.

The issue, then, is that in these works and many other works like them, there is not a cohesive explanation of why traditional apologetics is not sufficient when it comes to truly shaping how people come to believe what they believe. After all, it is one thing for these authors to claim that people do not base their beliefs (or change their beliefs) based on reason, logic, and argumentation alone; it is entirely another thing to demonstrate that this is true. Being able to demonstrate that this is true is the gap in apologetics scholarship that this dissertation will help to fill.

### **Section 3: The Power of a Christian Model of Belief Formation**

As mentioned earlier, this dissertation is centered on developing a Christian model for what I am calling "belief formation," the pursuit of which answers the question, "How do people *really* come to believe what they believe or to change what they believe?" The practical implication of this question is obvious. If, for example, 99 out of 100 non-believers reject the truth of Christianity because a Christian was unkind to them, spending book after book attempting to show that Jesus really did rise from the dead is missing the issue. Or if, for example, 99 out of 100 people who "deconstruct" their faith and become atheists do so because they no longer like biblical sexual ethics, then spending book after book trying to show that God exists is also potentially overlooking some key issues. The point here is that one might intuitively agree that one's beliefs are heavily influenced by the quality of one's relationships – painful or pleasant – with those who hold that belief (as suggested in the first example above) and/or that one's beliefs are heavily influenced by unattractive alterations in behavior that one's change in

beliefs might require (as suggested in the second example above), but the model in this dissertation demonstrates that these things are true.

It is important to note that this Christian model of belief formation is not an attempt to “crack the code” of how people form beliefs. Theologically, I have reservations that forming beliefs can be reduced to a kind of scientific model, where certain inputs in always lead to certain outputs out (Johnson, 2010). I discuss this important topic of the unpredictability (i.e., non-determinability) of human belief formation in Chapter 3, Section 1. However, the overall model provides apologists with a very important set of tools about how people generally come to believe what they believe and how people generally come to change what they believe.

#### **Section 4: Implications and Questions**

Once a model of belief formation is established in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I will lay out in Chapter 5 a series of specific recommendations for apologists based on what the model reveals. These recommendations will not be the main focus of my dissertation, but they can be the basis for a future series of “deeper dives” on what the model reveals. For example, one of the interesting facets of belief formation that has emerged in my research is the phenomenon known as the “primacy effect” (Lund, 1925). This is the idea, which is demonstrable by data and experiments, that people tend to remember much better the content of what they hear first and feel more positively inclined to believe it. This explains one aspect of why such a high percentage of children ultimately end up absorbing the beliefs of their parents or caregivers even when those beliefs would seem relatively irrational to everyone else. It might very well be, then, that it is not the strength of an apologist’s argument that is the deciding factor in whether someone believes it or not but rather when that person hears the argument. This is a remarkably important reality for apologists to understand. Could it be that instead of honing arguments to be stronger and stronger (on the assumption that a stronger argument is more likely to be believed), the far more important emphasis of apologetics should be getting the arguments that already exist into

the hearts and minds of younger audiences, who are more likely to believe it simply because they heard it first? These are the sorts of insights from the model that will be explored in Chapter 5.

In Chapter 6, I will outline important areas of future research that are needed to better validate or invalidate the model and make it more precise and helpful. These would include research questions such as:

1. Relative to one another, how do the various components of the belief formation model rank in terms of importance? How do they interact?
2. What role might personality types play in that ranking and interaction?
3. Are beliefs that have higher “stakes” (like one’s religion) formed differently than beliefs that are less consequential?
4. Does the model work cross-culturally? In other words, does this model of Christian belief formation only apply to people from a Western background or might it apply to everyone?
5. How do age and the time period in which a person grew up impact the model, if at all?

At the end of Chapter 6, I will suggest some ways that this research might be conducted. I will then conclude this dissertation in Chapter 7 with some closing thoughts and encouragements.

## Chapter 2 – Contemporary Apologetics and the Limits of Logic

### Section 1: A Brief History of Christian Apologetics

There is much to learn from Christian history (Rea, 2014). Stepping back and looking at how apologetics has been practiced in the past is particularly helpful as one 1) sees what role arguments, logic, and rationality have played throughout history and how that role has evolved over time and 2) develops a framework for what apologetical approaches are allowed for and best suited for today.

#### *The Scriptures on Apologetics*

Tracing the history of apologetics must necessarily begin with the Scriptures. The word *apologia* and its derivatives are found in numerous places throughout the New Testament. But most relevant to the discussion is when the word *apologia* is used in the same sense in which it is found in 1 Peter 3:15. That verse reads, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason [ἀπολογία, *apologian*] for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” The sense of the word *apologia* is highly relevant in 1 Peter 3:15 because 1) this passage calls all Christians to “always be ready” to make an *apologia*, and 2) this verse is often cited in current apologetics literature as the premier apologetics verse in the New Testament. In the same sense found in 1 Peter 3:15, there are at least 7 other instances of the word *apologia* in the New Testament: Acts 22:1; Acts 25:16; Philippians 1:7; Philippians 1:16; 2 Timothy 4:16; 1 Corinthians 9:3; 2 Corinthians 7:11. In each of these specific verses and in dozens of verses where derivatives of *apologia* are used, the meaning of the word is always “a defense” or “to make a defense” (Strong's, 2009). At this point, three important observations need to be made.

The first observation is that the Greek word *apologia* is actually itself a derivative from two Greek words *apo* (meaning “from”) and *logos* (meaning “word” or “thought” or “reasoning”). So, the specific kind of “defense” being suggested by the word *apologia* is one that flows from thought or, more precisely, “reasoned or intelligent thought” (NAS NT Greek Lexicon). This is important because one can

imagine a variety of ways in which something could legitimately be defended, say through physical force or even political power. But the biblical word *apologia* does not allow for that; it is a defense based on “reasoned or intelligent thought.”

The second important observation is that *apologia* does have some legal dimensions to it. Indeed, in many instances the Greek word *apologia* connoted a legal defense in an ancient court (Enenkel, 2019). This is important because the original readers of 1 Peter 3:15 would have understood the injunction to give an *apologia* in the sense it was commonly used during that time (i.e., as a legal or judicial phrase). This aligns well with how the word is used in the book of Acts, specifically Acts 26, where Paul is making a formal legal defense to Festus for the charges that have been brought against him. In a similar legal vein (although not technically so), Paul makes a defense (an *apologia*) to an unruly mob in Jerusalem in Acts 21 who is accusing him of various offenses. In this case, the mob was the prosecutor, judge, and jury. The readers of 1 Peter 3:15, therefore, would have imagined the command to give an *apologia* as something akin to what Paul did in these two instances, that is, to make a “reasoned case” for whatever is being challenged.

A final and absolutely crucial observation is that although an *apologia* was indeed a “defense based on reasoned or intelligent thought,” the phrases “reasoned” and “intelligent” did not connote that the defense had to be based on things such as logical deduction or philosophical proofs. Rather, the words “reasoned” and “intelligent” had more of the sense of “well thought out” or “calculated” or “purposeful” or “persuasive.” The “evidence” presented in the course of an *apologia* could range from things such as motive and experience to things such as history and circumstantial evidence. In other words, a “reasoned defense” could, and often did, rely on much more than pure “reason.” An *apologia* just meant a “well thought out” or “calculated” or “purposeful” or “persuasive” defense of something (NAS NT Greek Lexicon).



One of the clearest and most important examples of a biblical *apologia* is found in Acts 26, where Paul is brought before Festus to give a defense of why he should not be charged and should be let go. One immediately notices that Paul's defense (his *apologia*) has virtually no logical arguments and instead primarily consists of him sharing the experience of being converted to Christianity through a direct encounter with God. What Paul does in Acts 26 is incredibly important because it shows that the main way Paul made a "reasoned defense" of his innocence did not rely on reason or evidence at all. This is important in and of itself because it speaks to the nature of *apologia* in general, but it becomes even more important when one realizes that Paul admittedly was not simply giving an *apologia* for his own innocence but for the truth of the gospel itself. This is seen in Paul's exchange with Festus:

At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense (ἀπολογουμένου, *apologoumenou*). 'You are out of your mind, Paul!' he shouted. 'Your great learning is driving you insane.' 'I am not insane, most excellent Festus,' Paul replied. 'What I am saying is true and reasonable. The king is familiar with these things, and I can speak freely to him. I am convinced that none of this has escaped his notice, because it was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do.' Then Agrippa said to Paul, 'Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?' Paul replied, 'Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.' (Acts 26:24-29)

One can see from the exchange above that Paul's intention in sharing what he did was to persuade Festus – and everyone listening – to become a Christian. Festus understood as much, and Paul openly admits it. In summary, Paul's "reasoned defense" of his innocence and the gospel is nothing more than sharing a powerful personal experience that he adamantly declares shows that Jesus is the Messiah. It is important to note, however, that Paul references "the prophets" to show that his testimony is "true and reasonable." So, Paul does present "evidence." But presenting the evidence is really just Paul working to establish a rational basis for the experience that brought him to faith in Christ. It is the experience that Paul holds up to Festus as the basis for his faith in Christ.

Another instructive biblical instance that speaks to the issue at hand is when Paul visited Athens in Acts 17. This particular passage is one of the most commonly cited examples in contemporary

apologetics literature of someone in the Bible “doing apologetics” (Dahle, 2002). In his famous speech at the Areopagus, Paul skillfully uses logic and argumentation to make an appeal for belief in Jesus. But the problem with using this as an example of apologetics from the Bible is that the Bible itself does not call it apologetics. Twice in Acts 17 (v. 2, 17), Paul is said to have “reasoned with” various groups of non-Christians “explaining and proving” (v. 3) that Jesus must rise from the dead. Because what Paul did in Athens looks very similar to what is currently considered apologetics, Acts 17 is often used as an example of the same. But the Greek word for “reasoned with” is not *apologia*; it is *διελέξατο* (*dielexato*) or *διελέγετο* (*dielegeto*). In a strictly biblical sense, then, Paul was not “doing apologetics” on Mars Hill.

So, what is the point of highlighting the difference between *apologia* or *dielexato*? The point is that those who argue that Paul appealed to logic and argumentation on Mars Hill when “doing apologetics,” and therefore apologists ought to do so as well, are not understanding that Paul was not technically making an *apologia* in that instance in the sense of the biblical Greek term. One must be cautious, then, about looking to Acts 17 to determine what should or should not be “allowed” in apologetics. Apologists need not feel constrained to replicate what Paul did at the Areopagus in order to successfully fulfill the command in 1 Peter 3:15 to “give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” Indeed, in Acts 26 when the Bible clearly says that Paul was, in fact, making an *apologia*, he appeals almost solely to his personal experience. It seems clear, then, that if one is to practice apologetics from a biblical perspective, it is perfectly allowable to appeal to things in addition to and beyond reason and evidence. Indeed, perhaps one ought to.

### ***Two Important Qualifiers***

Now that an understanding of the Greek work *apologia* has been provided, the next step is to see how the concept has worked itself out in the history of the Church. Perhaps Christian history can shed light on why contemporary apologetics so heavily emphasizes logic, argumentation, and reason. Has it always been this way, or is this a relatively new phenomenon? But before that question is

examined, two very important points must be made that somewhat qualify how much one can actually learn from history on this important topic.

The first qualifier is that any history of apologetics will necessarily be deeply influenced by how the historian defines apologetics in the first place (Tamm, 2014). If, for example, the historian believes that apologetics properly defined is the discipline of using reason, logic, and argumentation to defend the Christian faith, then their history of apologetics will almost exclusively highlight those things. In other words, their definition of apologetics pre-determines what they are looking for historically, such that, of course, they will find that apologetics has historically been focused on reason, logic, and argumentation. After all, that is what apologetics is (to them). This “echo chamber effect” unfortunately limits how much one can learn from books focused on the history of apologetics about what apologetics has historically looked like. Take, for example, a more historically Pentecostal *apologia* for the faith that perhaps flowed out of something like the Azusa Street Revival in 1906. Had a skeptic dismissed the Christian faith by saying that God didn’t exist or that Jesus did not come back from the dead or that the Scriptures had no real power, someone who had just come from Azusa Street would have likely simply responded with a “reasoned defense” that sounded something like this, “Well, last evening I attended a church service where the Scriptures were read over a blind man to whom God granted newfound sight as he was prayed for in the name of the resurrected Jesus. Therefore, God *does* exist. Jesus *did* come back from the dead. And the Scriptures *do* have power. Come with me tonight and you will see for yourself.” From the study of the word *apologia* in the Bible, it is clear that this would certainly qualify as an *apologia* (at least of some variety) and history confirms that this was indeed an approach used by early Pentecostals. And yet in virtually no history of apologetics (at least in those I have read) is this approach ever mentioned. Why? Because it does not fit the assumed definition of apologetics. The main point here is that, in the case of apologetics, history can describe what apologetics has traditionally looked like, which is valuable. But one needs to be careful not to argue too forcefully that history is

prescriptive for what apologetics can and should look like. Again, there is value in reviewing the history of apologetics. But potential biases do require that one look outside of narrowly defined histories of apologetics to a broader history of how the Church has defended the truth of the gospel.

A second important point is that apologetics is necessarily reactive to whatever challenges its contemporary skeptics throw at it. In other words, the history of apologetics almost speaks more to the history of skepticism (Popkin, 1979) than it does to what apologetics could or should be in the future. In other words, because apologetics is a “defense,” it must react to what “offense” is currently in play. Apologists do not have the luxury of picking which issues they would most enjoy speaking about; they must speak to whatever current challenges to faith exist. Because that is true, the history of apologetics is somewhat limited in what it can suggest about what the future of apologetics should look like – including whether it should be broadened to include the various components of belief formation outlined in my model. To use an American sports analogy, if a football team is on defense and the offensive team only runs the ball and never passes it, the team on defense will have 100% of its plays where it attempts to stop the other team from running it. At that point, it would be foolish for the announcer to declare that the defensive team by definition only ever stops the other team from running the ball because that is all they have ever done. The truth is that the defensive team may actually be excellent at stopping the pass (maybe even far better than stopping the run), but because a defense by definition reacts to the offense, they have never really had the chance to do anything other than stop the other team from running. In the same way, if the challenges to Christianity have historically come from arguments, logic, and reason and apologists have responded in-kind, that does not mean that apologetics cannot include and be really effective (maybe even better) in areas that do not involve arguments, logic, and reason. Perhaps that is exactly what the future will require. I am arguing that Christians need to leave room to imagine a totally different kind of apologetics even if it does not have much historical precedence.

These two important points do not negate the value of looking at apologetics history to see if more holistic approaches have or have not played an important role. They simply give one pause that 1) finding holistic approaches in apologetics history may be a bit tricky because they potentially fall outside of what the authors are looking for in the first place, and 2) even if the historical evidence for more holistic approaches in apologetics is scarce, it does not mean that they cannot and should not have a robust presence in apologetics in the future. With these important points in mind, I now offer a brief history of Christian apologetics.

### ***The Historical Record***

Soon after the New Testament, the Patristic Era of Christian apologetics commenced. Patristic era apologists such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons dealt with a host of issues relevant to the budding Christian faith, defending the religion from charges of being politically subversive and warding off theological heresies like Gnosticism (Harvey & Hunter, 2008). Indeed, the writings can feel quite weighted toward logical argumentation and reason much like contemporary apologetics (Butler, 2021). In the Medieval era of apologetics, this trend continued with brilliant thinkers like Anselm of Canterbury and Saint Thomas Aquinas who powerfully appealed to reason to make a vigorous case for the Christian faith (Edgar, 2009). As Forrest, Chatraw, and McGrath write in their *History of Apologetics*:

Like Anselm before him, Aquinas held that Christian beliefs were fundamentally rational, even if they transcended the limits of reason, and were thus able to form a coherent and rationally defensible system. His *Summa Contra Gentiles* is clearly apologetic in both its general tone and approach. Whereas Aquinas's best-known work, the *Summa Theologiae*, is a detailed compendium of Christian theology, clearly written with the needs and concerns of believers in mind, the *Summa Contra Gentiles* anticipates questions that might be raised by Jewish, Islamic, or secular readers. It remains an important resource for modern apologists, not least on account of its thoughtful defense and articulation of core doctrines. (Forrest, 2020)

One exception to this approach, however, can be found in Gregory of Palamas, who was an Eastern Orthodox apologist who rejected reason's ability to provide certain (in the sense of "for sure") knowledge or doctrines of God. Rather, Gregory appealed to experience:

[The] extended debate with Barlaam led Gregory to develop a systematic account of the Christian life that emphasized the authority and evidential value of religious experience...Gregory's account thus differed in important ways from the Western medieval tradition of scholastic theology, which aimed to be a demonstrative science that showed the harmony of faith and reason. In Gregory's view, it is not necessary to validate Christian teaching by reference to human reason since true knowledge of God transcends the limits of sense-perception, concepts, and discursive reasoning. (Forrest, 2020)

In this particular case, then, one does see an apologist making a direct appeal to something beyond arguments – to experience - as an important component in belief formation. Indeed, for Gregory it was the most important component. However, the fact that this rare instance is from an Eastern Orthodox apologist highlights the overall dominance of reason, logic, and argumentation in the Medieval West.

In the Early Modern era, reason and logic were again the primary foundation upon which apologetics was built. Famous to this era of Christian apologetics was William Paley, whose “argument from design” postulated that if a watch must necessarily have a watchmaker, then the universe must necessarily have a Creator (Paley, 1802). During this era, Joseph Butler also pushed back on the deism of his day by reasoning for a natural theology whereby one could discern distinctly Christian attributes of God (Butler, 2006).

However, Blaise Pascal, one of history's most brilliant apologists, in this era pushed beyond reason in his *Pensées* (Hunter & Pascal, 2013). While he does spend time arguing from fulfilled prophecy and so forth that Jesus is the Messiah (an evidentialist approach), he also writes, “The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing: we know this in countless ways.” He also writes, “It is the heart which perceives God and not the reason.” Clifford Williams, in his book *Existential Reasons for Belief in God*, interprets Pascal this way:

In these famous quotes, Pascal is saying that there is a sharp difference between the way in which reason knows God and the way in which the heart knows God...The heart knows God by perceiving God. The heart knows God directly, through perception, not through arguments. And this perception is a kind of reason: ‘The heart has its reasons.’ It is not reason in the customary sense of reason – ‘of which reason knows nothing’ - that is, the kind of reason that counts as evidence for the truth of another claim. It is, I suggest, a

‘reason’ based on inclination, or the satisfaction of a need. It is ‘reasonable’ to know God directly, through perception or intuition, if doing so satisfies our inclination to know God. (Williams, 2020)

In many respects, Pascal was ahead of his time both in terms of his keen intellect and his appeal to humanity’s experiential need for God. Although he did not talk about it often, perhaps Pascal’s openness to experience was a result of his dramatic experience with God on November 23, 1654. As he wrote in his journal that evening, “FIRE. GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob. *Not of the philosophers and of the learned.* Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace (italics mine)” (Christian History, 2023). It is hard to imagine that Pascal’s own supernatural experience was not a significant factor in his acceptance of a heart-centered, existential approach to apologetics.

The 19th Century saw two developments that significantly challenged the Christian faith: Darwinism and Freudianism. Darwin’s theory of evolution shook the foundations of the literal reading of Genesis that was the predominate view at the time and also seemed to challenge Paley’s argument from design to the Creator (Yale, 2009). Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, influenced by the philosophy of Friederich Nietzsche, called belief in God a fantasy that resulted from a primal need for a dominant father (Assoun, 2002). Both Freud and Nietzsche railed against belief in Christianity, culminating in Nietzsche’s book *God is Dead* in 1882.

But this era also saw a relatively new approach to apologetics spring up in the thinking of Simon Greenleaf, who was the greatest living authority of his day on the common law rules of evidence and one of the founding faculty members of Harvard Law School. Greenleaf is the father of what has come to be known today as the school of “juridical,” or “legal,” apologetics, whereby the evidence for the Christian faith is presented as if in a courtroom and its veracity is tested as if in court (Greenleaf & Salvador, 1846). The echoes of this approach are still common in contemporary apologetics material such as Lee Strobel’s *The Case For...* series and J. Warner Wallace in his *Cold-Case Christianity* series.

Later in the century, B.B. Warfield was known for his scholarly and erudite defense of an inerrant Bible, the historical Jesus, and Jesus' bodily resurrection. Warfield sought to ground the truth of Christianity in the person and work of Jesus Christ as revealed in the pages of the New Testament (Riddlebarger, 2015). Finally, James Orr pushed back against Darwin, Freud, Nietzsche, and others by seeking to defend the Christian faith against such attacks by focusing on a defense of the whole of the Christian worldview (Scorgie, 1988).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian apologists honed their logical approaches to apologetics, especially as they confronted theological liberalism. Chief among them were J. Gresham Machen and Gordon Haddon Clark. Clark was a prolific writer and popular professor, who addressed theological liberalism by advocating a rigorous use of logic in Christian philosophy and apologetics (Clark, 1961). Machen, as one of the final voices of the so-called "Princeton School," tried to harmonize the belief that faith begins with the work of the Holy Spirit and a commitment to reasoned arguments on behalf of Scripture's truthfulness and Christianity's plausibility (Hart, 1997).

But it was not just the classical apologists who were building momentum during the 1900s. In the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, several Christian apologists began to push into the experiential areas of story, imagination, and art. Chief among these were British apologists G.K. Chesterton, C.S. Lewis, and Dorothy Sayers, all of whom understood the power of stories to communicate theology and apologetics (Tadie & Macdonald, 2015). Although each of these apologists had an incredibly high capacity for arguments and logic, they understood that facts alone often fail to persuade and inspire; they believed there must also be an appeal to the human imagination and experience. C.S. Lewis is perhaps the most famous of these three Christian apologists and his perspective on the human experience captures the overall sense of how they approached apologetics:

Although [Lewis] affirms the fundamental rationality of the Christian faith, Lewis's approach appeals primarily to the shared experience of ordinary people - such as a sense of moral obligation or a feeling of longing for something that is deeply satisfying yet is not delivered in or through anything that is finite or created. There is, Lewis suggested, a deep



and intense feeling of longing within human beings that no earthly object or experience can satisfy. Lewis refers to this experience as “joy,” and argues that it points to God as its source and goal (hence the title of his autobiography). Pleasure, beauty, and personal relationships all seem to promise satisfaction and fulfillment—and yet when we grasp them, we find that what we were seeking was not in them but lies beyond them. There is a “divine dissatisfaction” within human experience that prompts us to ask whether there is anything that may satisfy the human quest to fulfill the desires of the human heart. (Forrest, 2020)

It is interesting that the current era of Christian apologetics has slightly begun to shift back to the “imaginative and experiential side” of C.S. Lewis’ apologetic approach (Pierson, 2014). Evidentialists have often cited Lewis for his “liar, lunatic, or Lord” argument (and rightly so, as far as it goes), but newer apologists are appealing to Lewis because of his ability to communicate gospel-truths in the context of a great story.

As the world approaches a quarter way through the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Christian apologetics seems to be experiencing a renewal of interest across a variety of disciplines. Alvin Plantinga has spawned a renaissance in philosophy of religion; Richard Swinburne is pioneering an approach called analytic apologetics; William Lane Craig is a popular philosopher and debater who works to popularize detailed arguments for the Christian faith; Gary Habermas is a New Testament scholar who espouses a “minimal facts” approach to apologetics; and Tim Keller and Lee Strobel have written widely readable (and successful) books on apologetics that have reached large audiences. These thinkers are predominantly traditional in their approach to apologetics – using logic, arguments, and evidence to make their case for Christianity.

This very brief history of apologetics shows that appeals to logic, argumentation, and reason certainly have predominated the field for much of Christian history, especially as of late. But it is also clear that apologists from time to time have appealed to more holistic approaches including appeals to experience, existential desire, beauty, imagination, and so forth. These more holistic approaches seem to be gaining momentum since the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and are resulting in increased debate about the true nature of apologetics. The main point here, then, is that Christian apologetics has been

weighted toward logic and reason but that 1) the Bible does not limit it to this and 2) there have certainly been exceptions throughout church history.

## **Section 2: The Epistemological Limits of Logic**

The debate around the true nature of apologetics seems especially appropriate when one considers that Christian apologists throughout history have on occasion challenged the centrality of rationality and evidence in a person coming to faith. I have already documented Gregory of Palamas, Blaise Pascal, and some 20<sup>th</sup> century figures like C.S. Lewis. But perhaps the most robust framework that challenges the centrality of “proof” and highlights the limits of logic in how a person comes to believe is John Henry Newman’s *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, originally published in 1870.

In *Grammar of Assent* (Newman, 1870), Newman argues against the idea that logic and evidence are sufficient for humans to believe countless things that they rightly know to be true. His views were in opposition to the British rationalists of this day such as John Locke and David Hume. Newman argued that the way people come to believe what they believe (indeed to know what they know) is not based on logic that works itself out on paper but rather on an almost countless series of small and large experiences, events, and thoughts/perceptions that increase the probability of a belief being true. As these probabilities accrue, Newman argues that a human’s “illiative sense,” one’s ability to rightly move from the abstract to the practical, kicks in and allows someone to be 100 percent justified in acting on a belief that they have no way to incontrovertibly prove and/or of which they have no logical certainty. Newman argues that this is in fact how humans in the real world come to believe in what they do rather than following logical syllogisms and arguments based on evidence. In essence, Newman’s framework provides a way for humans to legitimately hold beliefs – including religious beliefs – without being able to prove them to the point of logical certainty.

In a similar vein, Alvin Plantinga argues in his book *Warranted Christian Belief* (Plantinga, 2000) that one can rationally embrace religious faith without the need to “prove it” logically or evidentially.

Plantinga is arguing against the likes of Immanuel Kant, a Christian philosopher who argued that the method a person uses to come to belief in God (its epistemology) is not rationally justifiable (Ward, 2012). Kant no doubt believed in God, but he argued that humans can never know “noumena” (or “mind-independent reality”). He claimed that humans can only know reality in terms of what he called “phenomena,” ways in which a person’s active mind structures and organizes her experience of mind-independent reality. In so doing, Kant’s philosophy resulted in skepticism such that what humans can actually know about God is severely limited, if not entirely crippled. Kant’s epistemology for all practical purposes cuts off any valuable access to metaphysics and, hence, God. As such, in Kant’s philosophy, God is not with humans, but beyond humans.

Plantinga argues that Kant was wrong - that it is not epistemologically irrational to claim to know God. In fact, Plantinga argues that belief in God could rightly be considered a “properly basic belief” – a belief that doesn’t need any further epistemological justification. In other words, Plantinga argues that if one’s senses and mental faculties are all working as they should be, a belief in God is completely justified. Far from being irrational to believe in God, Plantinga defends the paradigm-shifting argument that belief in God is philosophically rational and properly basic. It is not a “leap of faith” after all; it is the result of rightly functioning mental and sensory faculties (all of which the Holy Spirit helps with) even without any further formal logical proof.

Indeed, Plantinga goes even further. He argues that when such a belief has sufficient evidence to support it (it does not need to be incontrovertible evidence), the belief actually becomes knowledge. Plantinga labels this shift from belief to knowledge as “warrant.” So, for example, a properly basic belief would be that the person one is talking to and seeing is really there because it is fully justifiable to trust one’s eyes, ears, and sense to detect someone’s presence. But add some simple evidence to the mix – such that the person one sees said they would be there at 1:00PM and it is now 1:00PM – and one can

know that the person is indeed there. Based on this reasoning, Plantinga makes the stunning claim that one can know that God exists – even without any formal logical proof that He does.

The point in mentioning Newman and Plantinga is that they recalibrate the role of logic and rationality in apologetics to something more realistic. The aim of an effective apologetic need not be to “prove” that Christianity is true. Indeed, that is impossible. Rather, the far more realistic and appropriate effort is simply to show that belief in Christianity is rational. Notice that the goal is not to show that Christianity itself is rational; the goal is to show that belief in Christianity is rational. These are two categorically different objectives. The first objective - to show that Christianity itself is rational - is to pursue the “logic on paper” approach that Newman says can only take a person so far and does not actually account for the vast majority of beliefs that a person already holds. But the second objective - to show that belief in Christianity is rational - allows for a multitude of approaches that each generate an increasing probability in a person’s mind that the belief is true such that the “illiative sense” kicks in and the person begins to legitimately believe and act on Christianity without it ever needing to formally be “proven” to them. More will be said about the big difference between these two objectives in Chapter 3, Section 6 when discussing the component of belief formation called “Strength of Argument/Evidence for the Belief.” Suffice it to say for now, Newman and Plantinga offer the sort of epistemological framework that makes the model in Chapter 3 not only allowable and acceptable but even desirable. I will make one final important point about the limits of logic.

### **Section 3: The Physiological Limits of Logic**

Modern neuroscience has provided stunning insight into how the human brain works. Using Functional MRI (fMRI) scanning, researchers can show what parts of the brain are active during various human activities (Glover, 2011). For example, researchers can see what parts of the brain “light up” when someone feels affection or fear. Researchers can also see what parts of the brain “light up” when someone is making a decision; certain cognitive processes must take place in the brain in order for

someone to “decide” and those cognitive processes can be mapped. What researchers have discovered is that every decision flows through the emotional parts of the brain in some way. In fact, 95% of a person’s overall cognition happens in the emotional brain (Zaltman, 2016). Although it is complex and not fully understood, brain researchers have noted that although decisions may perhaps start in the more rational, cognitive space in the brain, they always end up passing through the emotional parts of the brain before triggering a response or decision. In fact, clinical trials of patients who have suffered damage to the emotional centers of the brain show that these clients are severely impaired in their ability to make any decision at all even if their rational, logical part of the brain is fully healthy. For example, a seminal study found that when humans had damaged the area of their brain where emotions were generated and processed, despite still being able to use logic and function completely normally, individuals void of emotion seriously struggled to make any decisions, even simple decisions like what to eat for lunch (Bechara, 2000). In addition, the researchers concluded that in the absence of emotional markers, decision making is virtually unattainable. The conclusion is remarkable. It is not just that humans do not make decisions solely on logic and reason alone; it is that they cannot. It is physically impossible. The human brain is simply not hardwired to act solely on rationality and logic.

These discoveries have revolutionized the field of psychology known as judgment and decision making (JDM). As one group of researchers put it:

A veritable revolution in the science of emotion has begun...yearly scholarly papers on emotion and decision making doubled from 2004 to 2007 and again from 2007 to 2011, and increased by an order of magnitude as a proportion of all scholarly publications on “decision making” (already a quickly growing field) from 2001 to 2013. Indeed, many psychological scientists now assume that emotions are, for better or worse, the dominant driver of most meaningful decisions in life (e.g., Ekman 2007, Frijda 1988, Gilbert 2006, Keltner et al. 2014, Keltner & Lerner 2010, Lazarus 1991, Loewenstein et al. 2001, Scherer & Ekman 1984).

Decisions can be viewed as a conduit through which emotions guide everyday attempts at avoiding negative feelings (e.g., guilt and regret) and increasing positive feelings (e.g., pride and happiness), even when they do so without awareness (for reviews, see Keltner & Lerner 2010, Loewenstein & Lerner 2003). Similarly, decisions can serve as the conduit for increasing a negative emotion or decreasing a positive emotion, tendencies associated with

mental illness...Put succinctly, emotion and decision making go hand in hand. (Lerner et al., 2015)

All of this points to a Christian model of belief formation that must incorporate components beyond logic, reason, evidence, and argumentation. At the least, the model must include more emotional aspects such as relationships, fears, desires, hopes, etc. that modern neuroscience can clearly demonstrate impact the way humans make decisions and form their beliefs. At the level of epistemology, the old paradigms of empiricism and logical positivism have long since lost steam (and rightly so) and different ways of knowing are being explored – such as Newman’s “illiative sense” and Plantinga’s “properly basic belief” – that allow for a rethinking of how people can legitimately come to believe, even know, certain things. If Christian apologetics is to remain relevant and effective, it must take into consideration a broader swath of how humans *really* come to believe what they believe. The model I outline in the next chapter does just that.

## **Chapter 3 – A Holistic, Christian Model of Belief Formation**

### **Section 1: Can a Model of Belief Formation Ever Be Christian?**

Before outlining the specifics of my Christian model for belief formation, it is vital to address two areas of potential concern about even pursuing a model like this in the first place. The first area of concern is about the role of God's sovereignty in a person's belief formation. The second area of concern revolves around the appropriate use (or not) of the field of psychology.

#### ***God's Sovereignty and Human Free Will***

Does a Christian model of belief formation – by simple virtue of it being a model – suggest a too mechanistic or at least a too anthropocentric posture towards human belief formation? The Scriptures teach that God initiates and draws people to faith. For example, Jesus taught in John 6:44 that, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them," and later in John 6:64 he says, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them." Indeed, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that, "The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit." So, where does the supernatural and sovereign work of God fit into a model such as this? Or does my model depend too heavily on assumptions about human free will and the factors that seem to impact human beliefs?

The reality is that my Christian model of belief formation can exist very comfortably with a strong appreciation for God's sovereignty. This is because my model does not assume an ultimate causation for why the means (i.e. the components) outlined in my model hold true as they do; the model simply points out that they do hold. Whether God "irresistibly" works through the various components of my model to draw people to himself or whether there is some measure (even potentially a large measure) of human free will involved, the point of the model is to explore how God has designed people to form the beliefs that they do. In other words, my model deals with the means and methods of belief

formation rather than the causation, and therefore my model holds regardless of one's perspective on the interplay between God's sovereignty and human free will.

### ***The Use of Psychology***

As one thinks about a Christian model of belief formation, it is critically important to assess when and where it is appropriate to leverage the field of psychology. For example, should Christians be skeptical of contemporary psychological and neurobiological research when pondering how people come to believe what they believe? Or should Christians eagerly embrace psychological models of human belief and behavior? The answer to these questions depends on how one views the interaction of psychology and Christianity (Johnson & Myers, 2010).

At its most basic, psychology is the study of mind and behavior. Although perhaps not called "psychology" at the time, the study of mind and behavior has a rich tradition within the Christian faith, with great thinkers throughout the ages writing insightful works that probe how the human mind works and how it relates to human behavior.

Though largely concerned with matters of faith and life, people like the desert fathers—Tertullian, Athanasius, Cassian, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory the Great—wrote with often penetrating insight into the nature of the soul and soul healing. However, Augustine, with his massive intellect, is widely recognized as the first great Christian "psychologist" (see Watson & Evans, 1991). Steeped in the Scriptures and the thought of the earlier church fathers, Augustine's understanding of human beings was also flavored by the philosophical tradition inspired by Plato. Nevertheless, his work on love, sin, grace, memory, mental illumination, wisdom, volition, and the experience of time provides a wealth of psychological insight and suggestions for further investigations. (Johnson & Myers, 2010)

Following Augustine, many Christian thinkers in the Middle Ages wrote about psychological topics. The most prominent of them was Thomas Aquinas, who drew on the thinking of Aristotle rather than Plato to develop his theories regarding the appetites, the will, habits, the virtues and vices, the emotions, memory, and the intellect. In addition, Christian philosophers after the Middle Ages continued to reason carefully about human nature in works of great psychological significance, including such luminaries as René Descartes, Giovanni Vico, John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley,



Thomas Reid, Bishop Joseph Butler, Gottfried Leibniz and Blaise Pascal—some of these are recognized as figures who influenced the later founding of modern psychology (Johnson & Jones, 2010).

Indeed, a host of other well-known figures in Christian history have tackled problems that today would fall under the category of psychology, broadly defined. For example, Luther and Calvin both wrote poignantly on sin, grace, knowledge, faith and the nature of the Christian life, and Catholics like Teresa of Ávila, John of the Cross, and Ignatius of Loyola described spiritual development with unparalleled clarity. And finally, perhaps the most significant Christian psychology author since the Middle Ages was Søren Kierkegaard, who used the word psychology to describe some of his works. Although Kierkegaard rejected natural theology and his epistemology indirectly resulted in skepticism (see Chapter 1 Section 2), he did offer significant insight into human development. Kierkegaard described human development in 3 phases – the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious – each one a “higher” form of human development than the one before (Kierkegaard, 2014). Not content to simply study human behavior, Kierkegaard’s focus was on the inward working of the human heart, the nature of faith, and the internal wrestling and dialog experienced by every human being. Accordingly, Kierkegaard wrote some profound psychological works. Over the course of a decade, he brilliantly described the nature of personhood, sin, anxiety and despair, the unconscious, subjectivity, and human and spiritual development from a deeply Christian perspective. Kierkegaard is, as well, the only Christian thinker who can be considered a father to a major, modern approach to psychological theory and therapy—existential psychology (Johnson & Myers, 2010).

At this point, however, it is important to distinguish between psychology as an overarching subject area and “modern psychology,” which is a specific iteration of psychology that has really only existed since the mid to late-1800’s. It is this version of psychology that has come to dominate the field. The main thrust of modern psychology, buttressed by its foundations in mechanistic naturalism, is that the human mind is really nothing more than the human brain interacting as it does with both internal

and external stimuli. Given certain stimuli, it can be very well predicted how a person will respond if they have a reasonably healthy and normally functioning brain. The human brain in many respects is no different than an animal brain except that it has evolved to greater complexity and capacity. Consequently, modern psychology is considered an empirical science that uses scientific processes of research and validation to come to conclusions about how humans think, feel, and believe. Its history shows how quickly and thoroughly it has come to predominate:

Beginning in the early- to mid-1800s, European studies on the nervous system and sensory experience demonstrated that aspects of human subjectivity could be objectively studied and measured. The discovery that lawful relationships exist between stimuli in the world and our experience of them proved that natural science methods could be usefully applied to the internal world of human beings...As the impetus to turn psychology into a natural science grew across the West, biblical study and philosophical reflection were systematically excluded as sources of knowledge about human nature, in favor of the empirical investigation of the structures and processes of the senses, mind, memory and behavior. (Toulmin & Leary, 1992)...Modern psychology was well on its way to laying claim to having “the monopoly of psychological truth” (Danziger, 1979, p. 28). (Johnson & Myers, 2010)

When one understands the assumptions and foundations of modern psychology, it is not difficult to perceive why many Christians over the years have been skeptical. On the Christian view, the human mind cannot be reduced merely to one’s brain, as if one’s mind is nothing more than neurons crashing together and synapses firing. Or, as C.S. Lewis put it, simply “atoms smashing against skulls” (Lewis, 1999). Indeed, the Christian claim is that humans are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27) with a mysterious ability to interact with him in a non-materialistic way, whereby one is not simply the product of one’s brain mechanistically interacting with one’s internal and external worlds. Humans, after all, are not merely physical machines. This is the primary rub between Christianity and modern psychology.

But the rub goes away when Christianity interacts with a humbler version of modern psychology that does not make claims about the nature of the human mind or whether the universe is naturalistic or not. This humbler version of modern psychology simply looks for patterns in the way that internal and external stimuli seem to shape human thinking, feeling, acting, and believing and then draws the appropriate conclusions. This humbler version of psychology still contends that physiological aspects are

at play in how humans think and act (after all, neurons do crash and synapses do fire), but it would remain silent on the metaphysical question of whether that is *all* the human mind is.

Accordingly, then, this humility also removes the tension between Christian faith and the highly technical field of neuropsychology, a field in which researchers can actually “map” what parts of the brain fire when someone has a religious experience, for example. The power of neuropsychology was discussed in Chapter 2 Section 3 – The Physiological Limits of Logic. If the conclusion from neuropsychology is that religious experience is simply the product of certain parts of the brain firing, then Christianity will certainly take issue with that. If, however, the conclusion from neuropsychology makes no statements about the validity of religious experiences or why religious experiences cause certain parts of the brain to fire – only that they do – then Christianity and neuropsychology can exist in harmony. The same could be said for the field of sociology, which is really just the study of how group dynamics impact psychology and the effect that has on individuals in the group. It is the unjustified metaphysical claims of modern psychology, and the natural sciences overall, that create the real problem with Christianity.

Philosopher Alvin Plantinga makes this point in his book *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Plantinga, 2011). He writes:

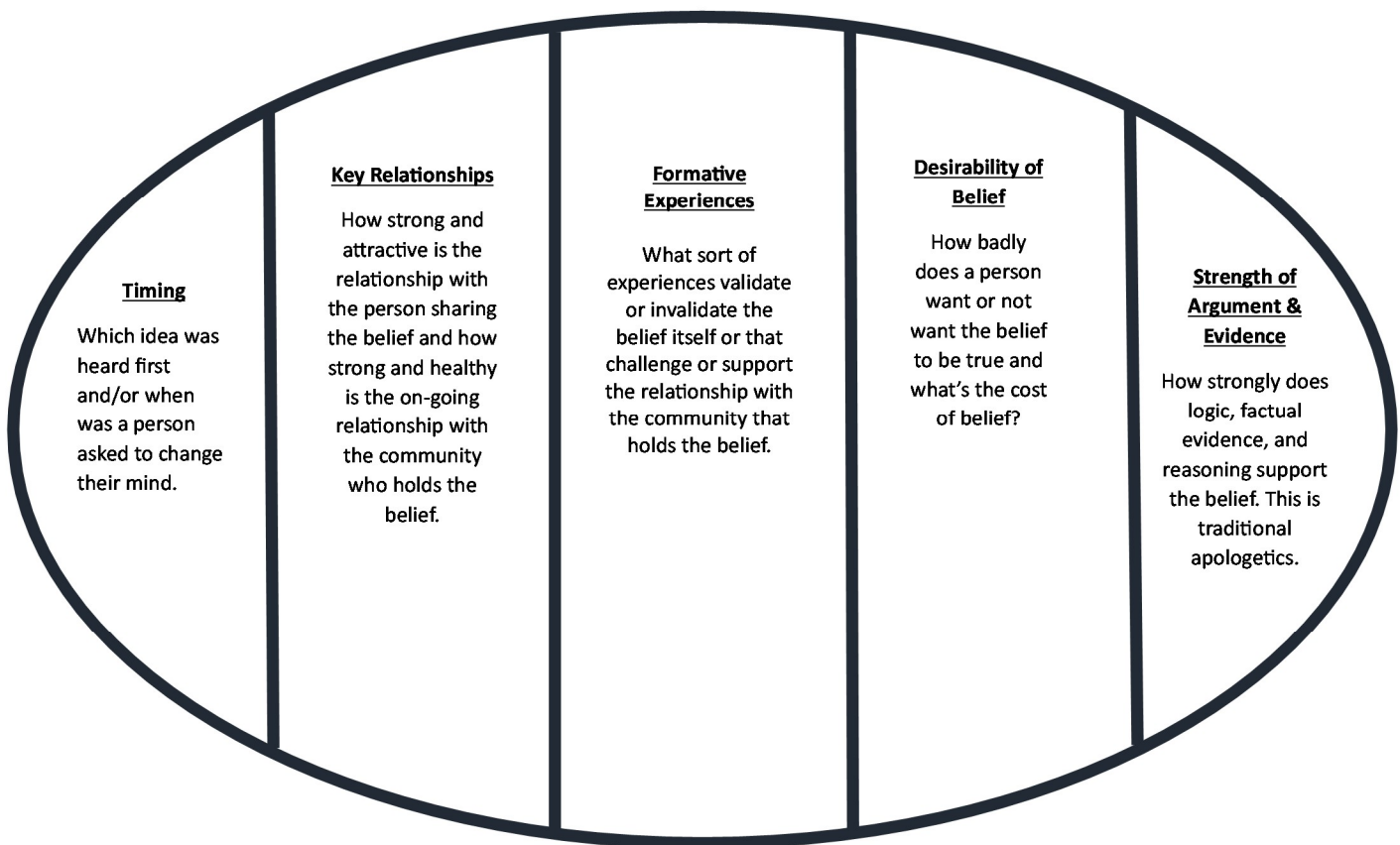
Now some writers seem to think that in coming up with a suggestion as to the evolutionary origin of religion, they are in some way discrediting it. Apart from that gratuitous “counterfactual,” however, there is nothing in Boyer or Atran that is inconsistent with theistic or Christian belief (although both seem at best extremely skeptical of such belief). Describing the origin of religious belief and the cognitive mechanisms involved does nothing, so far, to impugn its truth. No one thinks describing the mechanisms involved in perception impugns the truth of perceptual beliefs; why should one think things are different with respect to religion? According to Christian belief, God has created us in such a way that we can know and be in fellowship with him. He could have done this in many ways; for example, he could have brought it about that our cognitive faculties evolve by natural selection and evolve in such a way that it is natural for us to form beliefs about the supernatural in general and God himself in particular. Finding a “natural” origin for religion in no way discredits it. (Plantinga, 2011)

Plantinga's point here is extremely important. If the Christian is able to see that fields like psychology of belief or neurobiology, when properly understood and fairly represented, are not epistemological threats to the truth of the gospel, then suddenly they can become allies in understanding how people come to believe what they believe.

My Christian model of belief formation understands the field of psychology in this way - as an ally and not an enemy. But to be clear, the model does whole-heartedly reject the concept of biological and psychological determinism. Faith is ultimately a choice of the non-material mind, acted on by the Holy Spirit, as it interacts with the human brain. In other words, faith is not the result of neurons firing; neurons fire as a result of faith.

To say it differently, what I am proposing is *a model not an algorithm*. It is a model that espouses patterns and trends, probabilities and likelihoods, rather than mechanistic "inputs in and outputs out." There is no causal certitude claimed in this model or guaranteed outcomes. What it offers is simply a structured way to think about how people *really* come to believe what they believe – in essence, to discover and describe how God has built humans to make decisions and form beliefs. It is then fair and appropriate to ask, "If this is how people *really* come to believe what they believe, how do we make a reasoned defense of our belief in the Christian gospel in such a way that we significantly increase the likelihood that someone believes it?" The model below provides an answer.

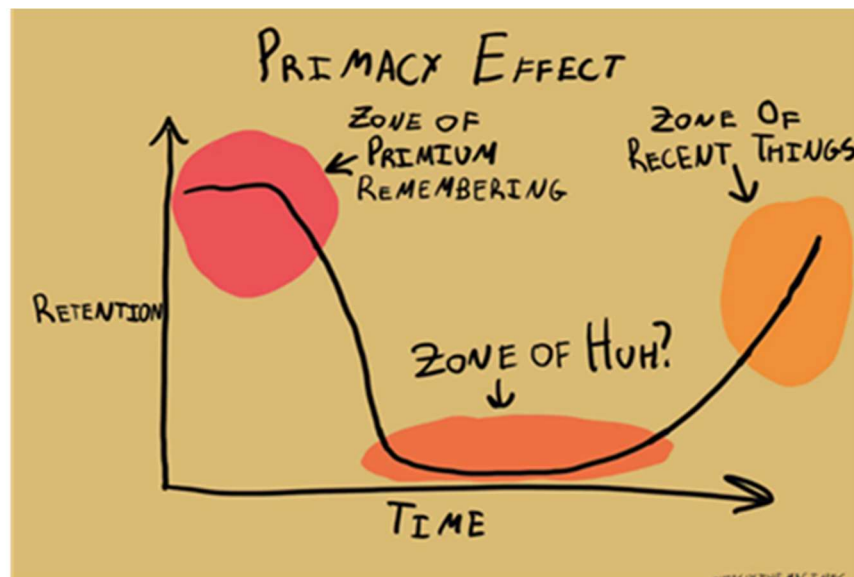
# A Christian Model of Belief Formation



## Section 2: Component 1 - Timing

What if a person's belief in something was not so much the result of the strength of the argument for that belief but rather was a function of when they first heard the argument for that belief? In other words, what if the timing of an argument actually impacted how likely one is to believe it or not? Research shows that this is, in fact, the case. It is known in psychological literature as the “primacy effect,” which simply refers to an individual's tendency to better remember the first piece of information they encounter than the information they receive later on. This is important because it indicates that information that is received first has an easier path into a person's long-term memory (Rundus, 1971). The primacy effect impacts the way people make decisions, as the way a person receives information has proven to be a critical factor in the decision-making process. An individual's opinion can easily be manipulated or skewed based on their first impression of an object or person (Decision Lab, n.d.).

The primacy effect is on the opposite end of the spectrum from the “recency effect,” which states that a person is more likely to remember the last (or most recent) items better than preceding items (Craik et al., 1970). In the middle, between the ideas that one hears first and the ideas that one hears last, are many ideas that do not “stick” as well in one's mind (Glanzer & Kunitz, 1966).



(Primacy Effect - the Decision Lab, n.d.)

It is important to note, however, that what makes recent items easier to recall is a different neural process than what makes initial items easier to recall; recent items are easier to recall because of how they interact with a person's short-term memory, not their long-term memory (Greene et al., 2000). These are two different systems in the brain.

To put it succinctly, when it comes to making decisions and a person's beliefs, timing matters. If one is more likely to remember an idea at the beginning or the end, the logical conclusion is that those ideas have an advantage over the ideas in the middle. And, of course, since there can only be one idea that was heard first (and therefore more easily gets into a person's long-term memory) whereas ideas that were heard most recently can (and will) constantly change, the idea that was heard first holds a consistent advantage in "staying power" over the idea that was heard last. In other words, the primacy effect trumps the recency effect.

At this point, there is an important point that needs to be made regarding these psychological effects, or as the literature calls them "psychological *biases*." This point is crucial for appreciating the value of a Christian model of belief formation.

The phrase "psychological bias" belies the epistemological assumptions of modern psychology. In the case of the "primacy effect," modern psychology would say that one ought not give undue advantage to the first idea that one hears; each idea should be evaluated neutrally on its own logical merits, and the "bias" generated by the timing of an idea should be removed from the equation. After all, who wants to be "biased?" In many respects, traditional Christian apologists would agree with the modern psychologists on this point. Why should someone give a cognitive advantage to atheism, for example, simply because they heard an argument against God's existence before hearing an argument in favor of God's existence? But this is exactly the distinction that John Henry Newman draws out in *Grammar of Assents* between "logic on paper" and the way that people really come to believe what they believe. Most of the decisions a person makes and the beliefs a person holds are not based on pure,

“unbiased” logic. After all, Newman argues, “pure logic” is not the gold standard by which a person *should* come to believe in something, as if believing an idea more readily because one heard it first is somehow wrong or “tainted” or at least less noble. This is an important point because many modern Christian apologists bemoan the fact that Western culture has become “less rational.” According to these apologists, the solution to the “de-churching” of the West is to pursue a renewed emphasis on logic and rationality because they believe that Christianity, when considered on these grounds, proves itself to be true and the best logical option (Huffling, 2021). Of course, this is correct insofar as Christianity is true and is the best logical option, and a renewed emphasis on logic and rationality is a good thing. But the problem is in their assumption that beliefs formed on a foundation other than pure logic and evidence are somehow “tainted,” or “weaker,” or “less sure.” This is the problem that has plagued Christianity throughout modernity. What if, for example, God designed humans to more readily believe ideas that were heard first (i.e., to be *biased* toward the idea heard first)? It is empirically demonstrable that humans do this. It is reality. Rather than trying to “cleanse” this bias by elevating logic and rationality to an even higher and “purer” level, what if apologists leaned into the empirical reality of the primacy effect and recency effect and said, “Like it or not, people are more likely to believe our ideas if we can get to them first. Our defense of the gospel is more likely to succeed if the timing is right.” This is not “conceding” to a “lesser” approach to Christian apologetics; it is leaning into the reality of how God has wired humans to form their beliefs. Resisting it is futile and unwise. The same point could be made for all of the components of my Christian model of belief formation that are outside of logic, rationality, and argument. Now back to the primacy effect.

I have already demonstrated that the primacy effect overpowers the recency effect by virtue of the first idea 1) never changing and 2) more easily accessing the long-term memory systems whereas more recent ideas 1) change often and 2) only have an advantage in the short-term memory system. But the primacy effect holds an additional advantage over the recency effect because of the way in which it



interacts with another psychological effect known as the “anchoring effect.” The anchoring effect describes the common human tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information offered (the “anchor”) when making decisions (Furnham & Boo, 2011). While making decisions and forming beliefs, anchoring occurs when individuals use an initial piece of information to make subsequent judgments. The anchor information then serves as a filter of sorts through which all other information flows.

One can quickly see how the anchoring effect works hand-in-hand with the primacy effect to give the first idea heard a significant advantage in its believability to the person hearing it. If the first idea heard becomes the anchor – and it undoubtedly has the best chance of becoming so because of its advantage in a person’s long-term memory – then all future ideas, including those that would oppose the initial idea, are evaluated through the lens of the initial idea. This is not to say that one never abandons the first idea heard or that the first idea heard always becomes the anchor. As mentioned earlier, my Christian model of belief formation does not assume a mechanistic “input in, output out” human mind. But psychological effects no doubt have been empirically verified to be accurate in the kinds of patterns and trends they detect and predict. And they have broad explanatory power.

For example, there is a remarkably high transference rate in religious (and political beliefs) from parents to children. In a 2019 study by Pew Research, data showed that:

Roughly eight-in-ten parents who were Republican or leaned toward the Republican Party (81%) had teens who also identified as Republicans or leaned that way. And about nine-in-ten parents who were Democratic or leaned Democratic (89%) had teens who described themselves the same way. The transmission of religion through American families appears to be similarly efficient. In the same 2019 survey, 82% of Protestant parents had teens who also identified as Protestant, 81% of Catholic parents had Catholic teens, and 86% of religiously unaffiliated parents – those who described themselves as atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular – had teens who were also “nones.” (Cooperman, 2023)

The report also referenced a previous survey that looked at young adults beyond the teenage years. This is important because researchers have found that adults between the ages of 18-29 often abandon the beliefs of their parents. But “the survey found that most people who were raised in a single religion – either by two parents of the same faith or by a single parent – retained that religion.

Roughly eight-in-ten of those raised Protestant (79%) were still Protestant. About six-in-ten of those raised Catholic were still Catholic (62%), and an identical proportion of those raised with no religious affiliation were still unaffiliated (62%)” (Cooperman, 2023). All this is to say that there is a remarkably strong (albeit not perfect) correlation between what children believe and what their parents believe – even when pushing upwards of 30 years old. Why such a strong, long-lasting correlation? The answer might very well be found in the primacy effect and anchoring effect; humans are wired to remember and believe the first ideas that they hear, and when a belief becomes “anchor information,” it is very likely to stick.

This timing component of belief formation is openly acknowledged in the Bible when parents are commanded over and over again to pass along God’s commandments to their children:

Deuteronomy 6:5-9 Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words that I give you today. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you’re at home or away, when you lie down or get up.

Deuteronomy 11:19 Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you are at home and when you are on the road, when you are going to bed and when you are getting up.

Psalms 78:2-4 For I will speak to you in a parable. I will teach you hidden lessons from our past— stories we have heard and known, stories our ancestors handed down to us. We will not hide these truths from our children; we will tell the next generation about the glorious deeds of the Lord, about his power and his mighty wonders.

The point here is that psychology predicts that children will be predisposed to accept the beliefs of their parents due to the primacy and anchoring effects. Because this is true, the Scriptures place special emphasis on encouraging and even commanding parents to share their beliefs about God with their children, recognizing that “those who get there first” will most profoundly shape the children’s beliefs.

### **Section 3: Component 2 – Key Relationships**

Humans are relational creatures. There is no facet of human life that is not touched in some way by relationships. Research shows that human life is at its fullest and healthiest when lived within vibrant,

strength-giving relationships where individuals can contribute meaningfully to the lives of others (Waldinger & Schulz, 2023). Research also demonstrates that human beliefs are influenced by key relationships, specifically 1) the relationship with the person who initially attempts to persuade someone of a belief and 2) the ongoing relationship one has with the people who hold the same belief, sometimes called “the tribe.” Because these relationships matter to what a person believes, I will consider each in turn.

Research reveals that humans are more prone to believe an idea that is communicated by someone with whom the hearer has a positive and healthy relationship. This is true whether the relationship is relatively deep and intimate or more surface and based on perception:

Indeed, we are more likely to yield to persuasion in order to maintain or attain certain mood states than in order to gain knowledge or advance our thinking. When someone makes us feel good – intentionally or not – we will be more likely to agree with their views and be persuaded by them. In persuasion, warmth and empathy go a lot further than logic and evidence. (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2015)

In fact, this dynamic is an established enough reality that legal scholars are concerned that the “likeability” (or lack thereof) of expert witnesses is unduly impacting how juries are receiving the objective facts presented by those expert witnesses. In other words, the exact same facts coming from two different people are believed differently based on the hearer’s perception of those people (Younan & Martire, 2021). On a mass scale, this is the dynamic that drives “celebrity influence bias,” the psychological effect whereby one’s celebrity status gives one a “believability” advantage, even in areas where that celebrity has no knowledge or expertise (Hoffman & Tan, 2015). The psychological data is clear: Humans are more likely to believe the ideas of people they “like” and with whom they enjoy a good relationship, of whatever variety.

This is because whenever a human encounters another human, there is an immediate and subconscious evaluative process that takes place that seeks to answer, “Can I trust this person? Are they safe?” along with myriad other questions. It is an unavoidable reaction that is hardwired into how the

human brain works (Gilron & Gutchess, 2012). Without ever purposefully doing so, the human brain and body subconsciously filter out threats and evaluate the trustworthiness of the person with whom they are interacting. Of course, the naturalistic materialist attributes this reaction to how humans have evolved in order to physically survive (Pressman, 2022). But the Christian attributes this reaction to how God has wonderfully designed the brain and body to immediately search for safe and healthy relationships, the very purpose for which humans were created (Rosner, 2017). Whatever the attribution, the reality is that this is how human interactions work. When a human being encounters another person with whom they feel safe and connected, a bond immediately forms – however weak it may initially be – that allows for mutual communication and the transferring of ideas and values. Without this bond, there is no mutual communication and transference; there is only resistance. A person is not only unlikely to believe an idea held by someone from whom they sense threats and resistance, they will likely not even listen to them (Hanson, 2023).

This is why it is absolutely critical that Christians work to reduce any sense of impending threat among those they hope to reach. A safe, healthy relationship between two people is the gateway for one person to accept (or at least consider) the beliefs of the other. Indeed, even if the argument for a particular belief is relatively weak but the relationship between the person listening and the person sharing the idea is relatively strong, the strength of the relationship will more than overcome the weakness of the argument in terms of the hearer's willingness to believe (Farnam, 2023). This perhaps explains why, for example, is not uncommon for one person in an engaged-to-be-married relationship to adopt the views of the other in spite of those views being poorly thought out or even unhealthy (Drake, 2022).

An additional aspect to consider when it comes to how relationships impact belief formation is the role of “formal authority,” by which I mean the right of one person to dictate (or at least significantly influence) the beliefs of another person simply by virtue of the authority's role or status. An example of

this would potentially be a Catholic family accepting the teachings of the Pope simply by virtue of him being the Pope. Although sociological research indicates that the role of authority in the West has diminished (Lingier & Vandewiele, 2021), it still does impact how people form their beliefs and is therefore important for apologists to understand.

In addition, research also shows that the strength with which one maintains an ongoing belief is strongly correlated to the strength of the relationship one has with the “tribe” that holds that same belief (Tajfel, 1982). If the relationship with the person initially sharing a belief is a gateway, then ongoing healthy relationships with those in “the tribe” are like a protective fence that keeps that person’s belief secure. This dynamic is a function of two psychological effects, the “in-group” effect (Everett et al., 2015) and the “descriptive norm” effect (Pryor et al., 2019). The in-group effect is the fairly intuitive idea that humans give preferential treatment and the “benefit of the doubt” to people who they consider to be the most like them. This effect is the result of a human’s need to feel connected and a part of a larger social group. The descriptive norm effect deals with the way that the group’s thinking and expectations impact the thinking of the individuals in the group. Humans on the whole dislike being different than their in-group and therefore intuitively seek to align with the norms of the group. This is true even if the person does not understand the reason for the norm.

Here, we show that people conform to social norms, even when they understand that the norms in question are arbitrary and do not reflect the actual preferences of other people. These results hold across multiple contexts and when controlling for confounds such as anchoring or mere-exposure effects. Moreover, we demonstrate that the degree to which participants conform to an arbitrary norm is determined by the degree to which they self-identify with the group that exhibits the norm. (Pryor et al., 2019)

In other words, the stronger a person feels like they belong to a group, the more likely they are to conform to that group’s norms and beliefs even if they do not understand the logic or reasons behind them. Such is the power of a sense of belonging.

I can conclude, then, that if a person feels loved, accepted, and well-treated by a particular group that holds a particular set of views, the likelihood of that person abandoning that set of beliefs

that binds the beloved group together is very small, almost negligible. This is especially true if there is no other tribe holding an alternate view that is attractive to the person. As I have argued, very rarely will someone break away from a tribe to venture out all alone or to join a tribe that they do not find attractive in some way. As communal creatures, humans are far more likely to accept beliefs and maintain those beliefs when the people sharing those same beliefs surround them with love, acceptance, support, and belonging. As author James Clear writes:

Convincing someone to change their mind is really the process of convincing them to change their tribe. If they abandon their beliefs, they run the risk of losing social ties. You can't expect someone to change their mind if you take away their community too. You have to give them somewhere to go. Nobody wants their worldview torn apart if loneliness is the outcome.

The way to change people's minds is to become friends with them, to integrate them into your tribe, to bring them into your circle. Now, they can change their beliefs without the risk of being abandoned socially...Facts don't change our minds. Friendship does. (Clear, 2023)

This, in addition to the timing component of belief formation, explains why children who have a good relationship with their parents are more likely (not guaranteed) to accept their beliefs and why children who feel loved, appreciated, and a strong sense of belonging within a church community will likely maintain the beliefs of that community. It is not necessarily that the arguments for the beliefs of their parents and church are so strong but rather that the relationships are so strong, which makes the credibility of their beliefs much higher. In other words, key relationships matter to how humans come to believe what they believe.

#### **Section 4: Component 3 – Formative Experiences**

As I have asserted so far, it is often erroneously assumed by apologists that humans make decisions based primarily on facts, on information. Indeed, I have already demonstrated that one's probability of accepting a belief is influenced by the timing of when one hears an idea and the relationship one has with the person sharing the belief and the group holding the belief. I will now add a third component to this model of belief formation – formative experiences.

Seth Godin, one of the most successful marketers of this generation and an astute student of human decision-making, argues that it is our emotional experiences that come first in our decision-making and that facts often lag behind. He writes (*italics added for emphasis*):

Which comes first? The feelings, the facts, or the story we tell ourselves that leads to the feelings?

*We like to think we make complicated decisions based on rational analysis, but most of the time, we actually make an emotional decision and then invent a rational analysis to justify it.*

That's why so many kids pick a school based on how it felt to go to a football game there in October. Or why it matters if it's raining on the day you visit. *Feelings first, then they create a story. Facts come in third. If our goal is to help people make better choices, it helps to first create better feelings.* (Godin, 2021)

Granted, Seth Godin is not an academic theoretician, but that is perhaps what makes his statements above so relevant. As a real-world practitioner, he has motivated and influenced countless peoples' decisions, both economic and personal, because he knows how people *really* make decisions. As he has argued here and elsewhere, decision-making is not primarily about the facts. It is about experiences that cause a person to feel a certain way, which then leads them to create a story about those feelings. After that, the person searches out facts or rational justification for the story. If this is truly how people make decisions, then it behooves the apologist to adjust her tactics accordingly. Rather than trying to persuade someone with the facts exclusively or even primarily, she should work to provide them with an experience that generates the right feelings and then guide them to the right narrative or story (the gospel) that explains those feelings.

What Godin suggests about the importance of experience is supported by findings in psychology and neuroscience. According to research, a person's experiences directly impact the way they perceive the world and even how their brain works.

A growing literature on experience effects shows that individuals act as if past outcomes that they experienced were overly likely to occur again, even if they are fully informed about the actual likelihood. This reaction to past experiences is long-lasting though it decays over time as individuals accumulate new experiences. Modern brain science helps

understand these processes. Evidence on neuroplasticity reveals that personal experiences and learning alter the strength of neural connections and fine-tune the brain structure to those past experiences ("use-dependent brain"). (Malmendier, 2021)

What this essentially means is that when a person experiences something, that experience creates a sort of neural reaction in their brain. The more often the experience happens, or the more traumatic the experience, the stronger the "impression" or "footprint" it leaves in the brain. This is an especially pronounced dynamic in children because their neural structures are already quite in flux by virtue of their young age. This is why childhood trauma always has a huge correlation with later psychological, social, and physiological outcomes in a person's life (McLean, 2016). It is not an overstatement, then, to say that experiences wire and re-wire the brain (Dow-Edwards et al., 2019).

The implication here is obvious. If one's experiences shape the brain in such a way that perceptions of the world run through the neuro-filter of those experiences, then those experiences are hugely important to what a person believes. If, for example, one experiences a painful loss of a loved one early on in life, that traumatic experience will have a powerful impact on whether one believes that the universe is a safe place or not and whether or not one believes that God is good. Because the Christian faith teaches that God is good, the experience of a painful loss early in life makes it harder to believe that Christianity can be true. In addition, experience is not just influential on the perceived validity of a belief; it is also influential on the quality of relationships within "the tribe." As was mentioned in the previous section, these relationships significantly contribute to a person's perception of the validity of the beliefs held by the group. In other words, a good or bad relationship experience with the tribe may be just as formative an experience as one that speaks directly to the truth or falseness of an idea held by the tribe.

This is why the experience of "church hurt" is so destructive to a person's belief system (Cook, 2020) even though, logically, it should not matter. For example, why should it reduce the believability of the strong evidence for Jesus' resurrection if the pastor sharing that evidence berates



and belittles his congregation? It does not logically reduce the validity of the evidence. But undoubtedly his poor behavior in the lives of those who have experienced it will impact how likely they are to believe that evidence or not. Their negative experience with the pastor has left an indelible mark on the brain, not to mention the key relationship that he has severed (see the last section). In other words, a person's good and bad experiences with the people who hold a particular view heavily influence the credibility of that view.

### **Section 5: Component 4 – Desirability of the Belief**

As I have argued thus far, in the world of Christian apologetics there is a much weight placed on being able to provide persuasive reasons for the Christian faith. These reasons often involve arguments for God's existence, the reliability of the Bible, evidence for the life and claims of Jesus Christ, and so on. Throughout history, these arguments have had success to a greater or lesser degree depending on a number of factors relative to the time period, the audience being addressed, and the specific situation of each individual hearer. No doubt the exact same argument made with the exact same degree of conviction by the exact same apologist has on one day won over a particular skeptic but on the next day been totally rejected and scoffed at by another. This was certainly true of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Often a particular teaching or miracle would engender praise and awe from one group but anger, scorn, and unbelief from another. As Jesus said often, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," meaning that some people would be eager to receive what he had to say, and others would not. What made the difference? Why did some have ears to hear while others did not?

Psychological research reveals that humans are hard-wired to believe what they want to believe. Humans have the ability to bend the facts to the conclusions they desire to find. Why is this so? Peter Wehner, a Christian ethicist, writes:

First, there's physiology. Sara Gorman, a public health specialist, and her father, Jack, a psychiatrist, explore this matter in their book *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us*. They cite research that suggests that processing information that supports one's beliefs leads to a dopamine rush, which creates feelings of pleasure. Moral

psychologist Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, says that ‘extreme partisanship may be literally addictive.’

On the flip side, ‘When something is inconsistent with existing beliefs, people tend to stumble... Information that is inconsistent with one’s beliefs produces a negative affective response,’ according to Norbert Schwarz, Eryn Newman and William Leach, experts in cognitive psychology.

In a sense, people see what they want to see, in order to believe what they want to believe. In addition, everyone likes to be proven right, and changing their views is an admission that they were wrong, or at least had an incomplete understanding of an issue.

Beliefs are also often tied up with identities. ‘If changing your belief means changing your identity, it comes at the risk of rejection from the community of people with whom you share that identity,’ according to chemist and science writer Christine Herman. That is difficult to do. (Wehner, 2018)

When one applies this concept to those who heard Jesus, one sees, for example, that a person who was feeling very inadequate and unappreciated was internally predisposed to accept his teaching about the shepherd leaving the 99 sheep to go find the lost one. They wanted to believe it was true, and so they no doubt believed it. Another person who perhaps felt that God was “out to get them” would have been internally predisposed to marvel at the story of the Prodigal Son, making it more likely that they believed Jesus’ description of the Father.

This internal predisposition, this desire to believe, is a major factor in what a person is willing, even eager, to accept and what they are not (Kolbert, 2017). Jana Harman is the author of *Atheists Finding God: Unlikely Stories of Conversions to Christianity in the Contemporary West*. After extensively researching the Christian conversions of 100 former atheists, she writes, “Interestingly, the majority of former skeptics in my research *first* decided Christianity was good or attractive, as something they desired, before they became willing to look to see whether it was true” (Harmon, 2023). This dynamic may explain, at least in some respects, why certain apologetical arguments work for one person and not the next. Among a number of the other components I have already considered, it seems intuitively true that how strongly a person desires a belief to be true is a significant factor in whether they end up believing it.

If it is true that a person's desire level impacts how receptive they are to certain apologetical arguments, then an apologist is greatly aided when she can find a way to create desire in the person or group she is attempting to draw closer to the Christian faith. For if someone strongly desires that what she has to say is true, even the most basic argument will potentially suffice. On the other hand, if someone has virtually no desire at all, the most brilliant, well-articulated argument in the world will be met with stiff resistance. To put it into a simple formula:

big desire + basic argument = likely success

tiny desire + terrific argument = likely failure

The wise apologist, then, must account for how to create desire just as much as they must work to develop good arguments. I will suggest some ways to do this in Chapter 5 when I discuss the implications of my model regarding the desirability of beliefs.

Desire is what compelled C.S. Lewis to begin his pursuit of God. Or, as he would put it, opened his eyes to God's pursuit of him. Lewis talked about being compelled by a desire for something beyond what his sensory faculties could provide. He talked about being "surprised by joy," when his brother showed him a beautiful blue flower. That sensation of joy, that desire that he could not fully articulate, is what set him off on his journey with God (Lewis, 2017).

So, what drives desire in a person? There are three aspects to this. The first is whether a belief is emotionally and existentially fulfilling or whether the belief leads to emotional and existential distress (Weir, 2017). Humans are far more likely to believe in something that makes them feel safe or calm. What gets complicated is that what makes one person feel safe or calm can radically diverge from someone else. But the underlying dynamic is the same. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic there was a nearly insurmountable gap between those who supported mask requirements and those who did not. For those who opposed masks, being forced to wear a mask conjured up feelings of being controlled and dehumanized (Andrew, 2020). For those who supported mask mandates, wearing a mask

made them feel safer and helpful to others. Throughout the pandemic, very few people “moved” from one category to the other. Each side found whatever data supported their position. People believed what they wanted to believe regardless of the facts. Humans do this far more often than they would like to admit.

The second is the perceived personal and relational cost or benefit of accepting a particular belief. Even if one finds a belief to be emotionally fulfilling, the human brain is hardwired to factor in how the belief will impact one’s valued relationships with others, especially one’s “tribe” (Allen et al., 2022). So, the emotional benefit of how a belief makes a person feel is always counterbalanced by the relational cost or benefit, which of course includes significant emotions of its own. In extreme cases, the relational cost of a belief is actually physically dangerous. For example, a woman living in Saudi Arabia knows that if she leaves her Muslim faith and accepts Christianity, she will not only be excluded from her community, but she will also likely be killed. The cost of her belief is unimaginably high. Because of its high cost, most people in these contexts are far less likely to believe in Christianity because it will put their life at stake. This is not to say, however, that people will never believe something that puts them in physical danger. It is only to say that physical danger is a huge impediment to someone accepting a belief because the cost of believing it is so high.

Finally, perhaps a lesser-known factor in how desirable a belief is to someone is how good it makes someone feel to share the belief with others (*italics mine*):

The brain uses two systems to help determine who the popular folks are - 1) the reward system: will this person be able to assist me in the future? What kind of return can I expect from maintaining or building this relationship? and 2) social cognition system: This is what helps us recognize the feelings, emotions, and intentions of others.

This is the same system that helps us determine which ideas we like and want to spread, which is exactly what researchers at UCLA found...Researchers found that there is something in the brain that activates when people find an idea worth sharing with others. It’s called the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) and it activates the moment you see something you want to pass on...The TPJ is also part of the mentalizing network of the brain. That’s a fancy way of saying it’s your ability to think about the thoughts and feelings of others. The mentalizing network is also composed of the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex—

which regulates choice behavior. The more these two regions were activated, the more successful the interns were at persuading others.

*Persuasion isn't only about what you find useful, it's how you believe that information will be useful to others. Persuasion has an extremely large social element that is wired deep within our brains. (Ayres, 2014)*

So, if a person finds a belief that they think will benefit others, it activates the part of the brain that makes *them* like the idea more. That is a remarkable discovery. If, for example, a person is excited about what the gospel can do for others, they are more likely to believe it themselves. This reality is why it is critical that Christian apologists be able to clearly articulate the absurdity (i.e., the bad news) of what life would be like if the gospel were not true and the beauty and wonder of what life is like if the gospel is true. For if a hearer of the gospel understands what great news it is and sees how it would be helpful for her friends, she is more likely to believe it herself.

#### **Section 6: Component 5 – Strength of Argument/Evidence for the Belief**

At this point, I have arrived at the component where traditional apologetics shines. This is the component of belief formation centered on the strength of arguments and factual evidence in support of a particular belief. I trust it has been clear from the outset that nothing in this dissertation should be taken as a diminution of argumentation, logic, and reason in the life of a Christian. I am firmly convinced that a lack of these disciplines in Christian churches is a detriment to the clear thinking and overall spiritual health of the Church – and society at large. The world needs far more teaching and training in these important areas, not less. However, my point in this dissertation is that for a variety of reasons, these disciplines have become synonymous with apologetics, such that it is very difficult to think of “defending the faith” apart from being able to provide arguments, logic, and reasoning. Indeed, as I have demonstrated in my Christian model of belief formation so far, one’s beliefs are undoubtedly formed by components and factors beyond rational thinking. But make no mistake about it, the strength of arguments, logic, and reasoning in support of an idea are critical to belief formation.

The reason that rationality is so important is because people generally want to avoid the notion that they hold beliefs that are irrational. People often embrace ideas that they admittedly do not fully understand (for example, they may not know if an idea is rational or irrational, but they still believe it), but rarely will a person openly admit that an idea that they do fully grasp and believe in is truly irrational. Humans want to think that they are rational and reasonable (Kahneman, 2011).

Meeting this need is the role of traditional apologetics – to show through logic, argumentation, and evidence that it is not irrational at all to believe the Christian gospel. As was noted in Section 3 above, although every decision ends up flowing through the emotional brain, decisions and beliefs do flow through the rational part of the brain, as well. Rationality absolutely does matter. In a study done by the Next Generation Project of Biola University, it was shown that when a student going off to college had a good understanding of some basic apologetics, the likelihood of them abandoning their faith was greatly reduced and all positive spiritual outcomes improved. The authors of the study write:

Young people who said their congregation did an excellent job at answering their questions about the faith were much stronger spiritually when re-interviewed five years later. At the end of the study, young people from churches that excelled at reasonable, objective answers to their questions had much better spiritual outcomes. They were much more likely to have made a personal faith commitment and be actively engaged in the Christian faith. And they were much less likely to have doubts about God or to describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or non-religious. Compared to youth from other congregations, they were much more likely to attend services weekly, pray and read Scripture daily, and gladly share their faith with others. They were much more likely to believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God risen from the dead. Finally, they were much more likely to report that their faith was an extremely important aspect of their lives and that they had an “extremely close” personal relationship with God. (Barnett & Hazen, 2016)

Traditional apologetics no doubt helps to shape and, in many ways, to protect a person’s Christian beliefs. After all, I have noted that people intuitively do not want to hold beliefs that they think are irrational. Furthermore, there is a plethora of anecdotal evidence that traditional apologetics has been instrumental in people coming to faith in Christ (Harmon, 2023). It is not nearly as frequent, say, as traditional apologetics being an encouragement and lifeline to those who already believe, but certainly

many cases exist where logic, evidence, and reason have opened the door to first-time faith. But here several important points must be made.

The first point is that rationality never exists in a vacuum. I have already shown that every decision flows through the emotional brain, and I have shared research that illustrates a person's brain structure is significantly impacted by her experiences. These are facts of psychology and neurobiology. It is not as though the rational brain stands off to the side surrounded by protective walls, such that it remains "untainted" by emotion and experience. No decision, no belief, is ever "purely rational" in the sense that it is untouched by emotion and experience. Every decision a person makes and every belief a person holds is emotional and experiential at some level.

But the second point is that the rational brain can exert significant influence on a person's emotions, experiences, and desires (Backus, 1994). Influence flows both ways. This means that although every decision and every belief is emotional and experiential at some level, rationality has the ability to shape one's emotions and interpret one's experiences. From this psychological perspective, traditional apologetics with its emphasis on logic and rationality serves in an important "influencer" role or "assistant" role or "helper" role in how people come to decide and believe.

One increasingly influential psychological model of how rationality impacts belief is called "dual process theory" (Kahneman, 2011). This theory argues that humans have two different types of mental processes:

When we're making decisions, we use two different systems of thinking. System 1 is our intuition or gut-feeling: fast, automatic, emotional, and subconscious. System 2 is slower and more deliberate: consciously working through different considerations, applying different concepts and models and weighing them all up. (*Dual Process Theory - Definition and Examples — Conceptually*, n.d.)

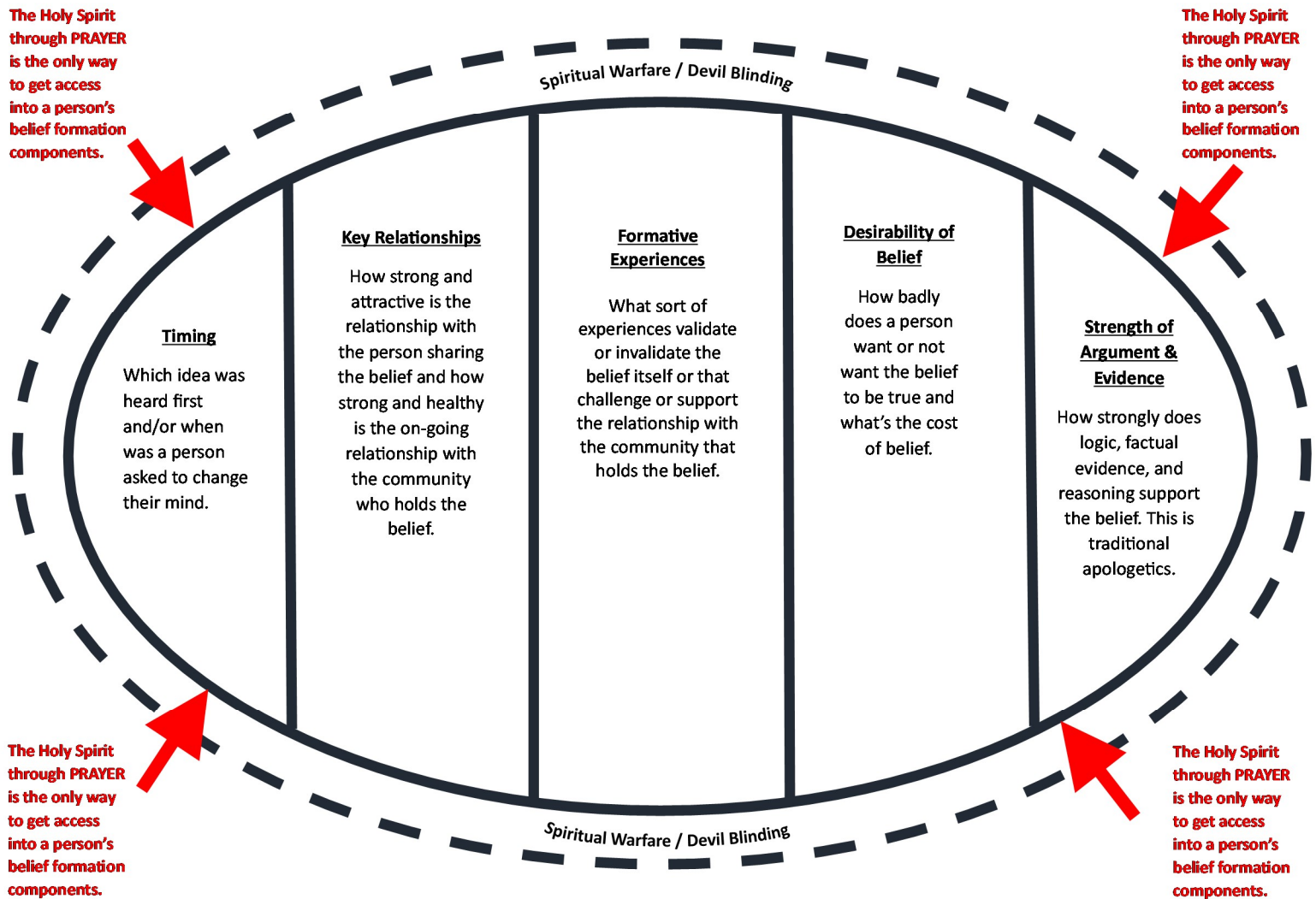
In the dual process model, System 2 represents the "rational" side of human thinking. It is commonly held by dual process theorists that System 2 came after System 1 in the history of human brain development and is found in no non-human species, whereas System 1 elements are found in

non-humans. In other words, rationality is exclusively human. The power of dual process theory is that it acknowledges two important realities. First, the theory reveals that rationality and logic are not the only mental processes that shape what a person believes; intuition and emotion play powerful roles as well. But secondly, the theory demonstrates that rationality and logic, when properly leveraged, can exert tremendous influence over what a person believes and can provide very helpful guardrails for the subconscious processes that can often sabotage sound thinking, prudent decisions, and wise beliefs (Mercier & Sperber, 2011). In other words, although logic and rationality are never the only mental processes involved in making decisions and forming beliefs, they undoubtedly play a crucial role in belief formation.



## Chapter 4 – Spiritual Realities: The Component That Encircles All Components

# A Christian Model of Belief Formation



### Section 1 - Introduction

The final component of my Christian model of belief formation, spiritual realities, is actually what makes it a distinctly Christian model. Up to this point, the components have been sociological/psychological. No doubt I have situated these components within an overall Christian

worldview that I argue is compatible with a humble version of psychology and neurobiology, but this final component is where there is no compatibility between my Christian model and any non-Christian model. The two must diverge here. It is a critically important component that thoroughly encircles and impacts all of the other components. Unfortunately, it is also a component that far too often gets overlooked in Christian apologetics. I have very intentionally kept the spiritual realities component until last and am giving it its own chapter as an attempt to ensure that I am not guilty of the same critique I am making of others. I will also spend a significant amount of time in Chapter 5 discussing the apologist's most important tool when it comes to spiritual realities and apologetics over all – the power of prayer.

## **Section 2 – Mount Carmel and Mars Hill**

“What hath Mount Carmel to do with Mars Hill?” This question mirrors the famous line from Tertullian's *Prescription Against Heretics*, in which he asks, “What hath Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?” In modern vernacular, Tertullian's quote has come to symbolize the inherent tension that results whenever two disparate ways of seeing the world collide. When this collision takes place, a logical question becomes, “Should an attempt be made to synthesize these different viewpoints?” or, “Are the viewpoints so far apart that they best be kept separate?” Tertullian was skeptical about the possibility of a positive synthesis between Greek pagan philosophy and the Christian religious thinking of his day. The gap seemed too broad to span. Likely it was so. But there have been many instances throughout history, indeed throughout Church history, in which seemingly conflicting perspectives have blended into something new and better – say, for example, when George Whitefield blended the tradition of rich, historical theology with innovative and populist preaching methods (Kidd, 2014). In this section, I will examine two different ways of seeing the world – both squarely within the Christian tradition - that have historically been mostly isolated from one another, indeed perhaps even somewhat skeptical of one another. The two ways of seeing the world I will be examining are the rationality and intellectualism of traditional Christian apologetics (i.e., “Mars

Hill”) and the supernaturalism of Pentecostalism (i.e., “Mount Carmel”). I have chosen Pentecostalism as my representative “supernaturalist movement” for three reasons. First, Pentecostalism is contemporary. While individuals and groups throughout antiquity have experienced and interacted with the supernatural, Pentecostalism is a modern, prominent, and sustained expression of a uniquely supernatural flavor (see my third point below) of Christianity. Thus, it seems prudent to feature the movement here. Secondly, Pentecostalism is growing rapidly and is often considered to be the fastest growing “religion” in the world (Hardy, 2022). Thirdly, the Pentecostal emphasis on the supernatural feels unique to me. The reality is that all biblical Christians are supernaturalists in some sense. Among countless other biblical teachings, the doctrine of an invisible and spiritual triune God who created the universe *ex nihilo* requires it! In that sense, Pentecostalism is not unique. But its emphasis on the normalcy and expectation of healings, speaking in tongues, demonic deliverance, spiritual warfare, the charismatic gifts, and so on make it a unique contemporary expression of supernaturalism.

This chapter explores the possibility of a healthy synthesis between these two “camps” and is structured according to that purpose. In Section 3, I will provide a biblical perspective that shows a synthesis is not only possible but might potentially be normative. I will do this by looking at the lives and writings of Apostle Peter and Apostle Paul. In Section 4, I will offer a historical perspective on the current lack of much synthesis. I will do this by providing a very basic history of Christian apologetics and the Pentecostal movement. Although there is certainly debate and nuance about when Pentecostalism actually began, for the sake of this paper it will suffice to begin my historical analysis in the very early 20th century with the stirring on Azusa Street. I will use the content of Chapter 4 to later argue in Chapter 5 that the best way to advance the gospel is to find a healthy synthesis between the rationality of traditional apologetics and the supernaturalism of Pentecostalism. Indeed, I will argue that not only would a stronger synthesis be healthy but that it could actually be a major catalyst for significant gospel advance.

### Section 3 – A Biblical Synthesis

As one looks through the New Testament, it becomes evident that the authors did not see a tension between a high regard for rational argumentation and a robust view of the supernatural spirit realm. I use the word “robust” here in the sense that the New Testament authors saw the spiritual realm as having a significant impact on the normal, everyday life of a human being rather than just being a theological construct. The New Testament is replete with Jesus’ miracles and exorcisms and warnings against the devil and his demons, culminating in Paul’s famous maxim that “we wrestle not against flesh and blood” (Eph 6:12). It is also full of exorcisms, mighty miracles, and supernatural occurrences found throughout the book of Acts and beyond. This spiritually “robust” view of the New Testament authors is to be contrasted with the view of many modern Christians in the West who would in principle agree that there are angels, demons, a devil of some kind, and even an actual and personal Holy Spirit, etc. but for whom these things are of little daily consequence. It is important to note, however, that this robust view of the spiritual realm did not denigrate the New Testament author’s valuation of logical argumentation – for example, the kind of logical argumentation one might find in Christian apologetics. As I will show, there was a harmonious synthesis between the two. One sees this particularly within the life of Apostle Peter and Apostle Paul.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the most oft-cited verses in apologetics literature is 1 Peter 3:15. This verse is used to show that apologetics is an imperative in the life of a Christian. Peter writes, “But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.” The phrase “give an answer” is the Greek word *apologian*, from which the English word apologetics is derived. So, it is indeed the case in this passage that Peter is validating the need to “make a defense” of one’s Christian faith. But Peter also writes later in that same epistle that Christian believers should, “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist

him, standing firm in the faith, because you know that the family of believers throughout the world is undergoing the same kind of sufferings.” For Peter, there is certainly an imperative to provide an *apologian* for one’s faith but there is also an imperative to resist a real and enemy spirit called the devil. There was a synthesis. In addition, the book of Acts shows Peter standing up to preach very well-argued and logical sermons but also features him healing regularly and miraculously, having supernatural visions, and speaking in tongues. In the life of Peter, the two “camps” of rational argumentation and supernaturalism find an expression.

The same goes for the life of Paul. Just as 1 Peter 3:15 is the primary verse used to show the imperative to do apologetics, Paul’s sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17) is often used as the primary instance of someone doing apologetics in the Bible. In his sermon on Mars Hill, Paul skillfully makes an argument for the “good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18) by leveraging the philosophical paradigms of the Epicurean and Stoics to show that they have incorrectly labeled the Christian God as “the unknown god.” He even quotes one of their own poets, Epimenides, to make his point. But Paul’s practice of using logical argumentation and philosophy in Acts 17 to make a case for the Christian God in no way indicates that he did not acknowledge that at the root of unbelief were spiritual beings and realities that must absolutely be dealt with if someone is to believe the gospel. Paul’s view on this is best articulated by two passages in his second letter to the Corinthians. In the first passage, he writes:

Therefore, since through God’s mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God [*italics mine*]. (2 Cor. 4:1-4)

To counteract this blinding, Paul says that he and his compatriots “do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord.” So, in this instance, Paul acknowledges both the decidedly spiritual dimensions of unbelief and the need for preaching to counteract it. But Paul does not see preaching as an exercise

done independently from the realities of the spiritual realm. In the second passage noted for my purposes here, Paul writes:

By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am “timid” when face to face with you, but “bold” toward you when away! I beg you that when I come, I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor. 10:1-5)

In this passage, Paul is using remarkably “spiritual language,” referring to things like “divine power to demolish strongholds” and “weapons not of this world” and “demolishing every pretension” (the Greek word *hupsóma* or “high thing”). This is the language of spiritual warfare as it relates to arguments, thoughts, and ideas. For Paul, who like Peter in the book of Acts is featured performing healings, working mighty miracles, and speaking in tongues, there is clearly no disconnect or tension between standing up to make a rational defense of the faith on one hand and driving out a demon on the other. He and Peter both exhibited a penchant for Mars Hill logic and rationality but also demonstrated incredible authority and power in the spiritual realm just like Elijah had on Mount Carmel. Their lives were a synthesis of the two, reflecting them both. It is unfortunate, then, that such a synthesis is often difficult to find in the current Christian landscape in the West. In the next section, I will provide a brief historical overview of why this is the case, focusing mainly on recent history starting in the early 20th century.

#### **Section 4 - The Lack of a Modern Historical Synthesis**

It is interesting to note that the earliest Christian apologists demonstrated a synthesized approach that was very similar in many ways to Peter and Paul. Going back to Tertullian’s *Apologeticum* in 197 AD, widely regarded as one of the best ancient defenses of Christianity, he makes the startling claim (both to the ancient reader and to the modern) that the gods of polytheistic Greece were in fact demons (Skarsaune, 1997). Justin Martyr, the great apologist of the 2nd century, anchored one of his

arguments for Christ in the fact that demons were readily subdued in Jesus' name. He writes, "And now we, who believe on our Lord Jesus, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, when we exorcise all demons and evil spirits, have them subjected to us" (Skarsaune, 1997). Similar sentiments are explicitly found in the writings of Origen, Theophilus of Antioch, and Athanasius, who all argued that one of the proofs for Christianity was the fact that demons fled at the name of Jesus. Indeed, the great Christian apologist Tertullian even boasted to pagan, non-Christians, "It has not been an unusual thing for the testimonies of your deities to convert men to Christianity" (Skarsaune, 1997). These early Church fathers modeled a powerful synthesis between the most rigorous of academic arguments and a strong sense of spiritual authority in the heavenly realms as an apologetic for Christianity.

But this synthesis does not seem to last much into the Medieval period when authors like Anselm of Canterbury and St. Thomas Aquinas began to elevate to a greater degree the inherent reasonableness and logic of Christianity. This is not to say at all that those like Anselm and Aquinas rejected the reality of the spirit world, but it is to say that the synthesis began to weaken such that the rational and logical basis for Christianity started to be seen as its surest footing (Dulles, 2005). Indeed, as the Enlightenment began to emerge in Europe and along with it a new brand of skepticism, the apologists of the day moved even deeper into rationalistic justifications for Christianity using evidence, probability, and inference from earth's design. In many ways, the arc of apologetics followed the trajectory of the West at large and moved away from much thought or interest in the spiritual realm and toward "modernity" (McGrath, 2012). When the idea of Darwinism came on the scene in the 1860's, it was cataclysmic shock to Christians who held to a literal reading of Genesis (as many of them did) and the battlefield shifted more heavily into the natural sciences. Because challenges to the Christian faith were now coming from areas like philosophy and science, Christian apologists were often those who specialized in such disciplines (Forrest, 2020) and who often preferred logical argumentation to discussions of heavenly realities like angels and demons and who certainly would have been skeptical of

physical healings or supernatural phenomenon like speaking in tongues or driving out demons. The synthesis seen in Peter and Paul and, to a certain degree, in the Patristic Fathers became much harder to find. Apologetics had essentially become Mars Hill with Mount Carmel very much off in the distance.

This is certainly not to say that faithful Christians beyond the Patristic area failed to be rightly attuned to the Holy Spirit or that they insufficiently acknowledged the supernatural realm. Nor is it to say that those Christian apologists who prioritized logic and argumentation were devoid of interest in supernatural realities or devoid of supernatural experiences. But this is to say that as Christian apologists began to react more and more to the scientific worldview – and the skepticism that came with it – the supernatural realm became less and less of a concern.

By the time of the Azusa Street Revival in 1906, Christian apologists were dealing with German liberal theology, textual criticism, Hume’s attack on miracles, and the aforementioned Darwinian evolution (Forrest, 2020). Apologists like B.B. Warfield and J. Gresham Machen in America and European apologists like A.E. Taylor and G.K. Chesterton engaged these anti-Christian forces using rigorous historical and philosophical arguments, appeals to morality, and even the inexplicable existence of the human imagination (in the case of Chesterton). But to the average Christian, these apologetic approaches remained fairly distant. These apologists, after all, were highly educated and spoke about topics and concerns of little interest to the general public. Outside of academia, it was little known how vociferously Christianity was under attack and how it was being defended.

Azusa Street was just the opposite. Far from being a bunch of academics sitting around and pontificating on the nature of this or that, Azusa Street was pure spiritual power experienced by much “lesser” people. As Gastón Espinosa recounts in his excellent history of Azusa, “These events attracted a growing throng of curious and spiritually ‘hungry’ washerwomen, cooks, laborers, janitors, ministers, and housewives” (Espinosa, 2014, p. 56). This was not an academic crowd. This is not to say that Azusa Street was totally devoid of thinking people or intellectually rigorous people, but it is to say that it was



the signs and wonders of the Holy Spirit and the baptism of the Holy Spirit that predominated. One might say that at Azusa Street, the God whom the Christian apologists and philosophers argued existed actually showed up. Of course, there had been previous moments (even seasons) where God had manifested himself clearly and supernaturally, but Azusa Street was the beginning of a sustained season of supernatural expression. As Stanley Burgess notes, “Most historians of Classical Pentecostalism consider this revival to be the primary catalyst for the world-wide spread of the movement in the twentieth century” (Burgess, 2014, p. 240). In many respects, the Pentecostalism that resulted was the first major movement to codify that supernatural experiences were more than just momentary and exceptional interactions with God but were actually vital and necessary to the Christian life. Again, this is not to say that Christians before Pentecostalism did not experience the supernatural. They did. But it is to say that Pentecostalism as a movement placed unique emphasis and expectation on the supernatural in an era when it was relatively uncommon to do so. Whatever one makes of the theological underpinnings of these beliefs, it cannot be doubted that the Pentecostalism that resulted from Azusa Street was something new to most Christians at the time. The heavenly realms were being opened and people were showing interest and interaction with spiritual realities that were in many ways unprecedented.

As I have presented to this point, the historical developments of Christian apologetics and Pentecostalism explain in large part why there is currently minimal interaction between the two “camps.” This was because at the time of Azusa, apologetics had evolved to be a decidedly intellectual enterprise (understandably so since that is where the attacks on Christianity had emerged) while Pentecostalism elevated the experiential role of the Holy Spirit and the spiritual realm. Accordingly, there was not much opportunity for a healthy synthesis. In Chapter 5 Section 2, I will suggest a framework for developing this much-needed synthesis.

## Chapter 5: Implications of the Model for Apologetics

### Section 1: Introduction

At this point, it is time to get practical. In the preceding sections, I have developed a Christian model of belief formation. But what difference does it make in the real world? In this section, I will outline the specific implications of each component of my model and give a few practical ways in which the components can be lived out by Christian apologists.

One very important thing to note about all of the implications is that they push the apologist to take a very “questioner-oriented” posture when doing apologetics. This is a crucial implication of the model overall. As the famed Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias used to say throughout this career, “Behind every question is a questioner.” The model I have set forth in this dissertation certainly affirms that statement but takes it one step further by arguing that behind every question is a questioner, and there have been processes of belief formation happening in their brain, in their past, in their heart, in their relationships, and in the spiritual realm to bring them to the views that they currently hold. I have encouraged Christian apologists to be as aware as they can be of these things as they make a defense of the Christian faith. This is integrated apologetics – an approach to apologetics that takes seriously the belief formation dynamics happening in the life of the questioner when making an *apologia* for the gospel. It is a decidedly practical approach that keeps the focus on the questioner as a human being made in the image of God rather a logic jousting opponent. Accordingly, Section 2 deals with the practical implications of my Christian model of belief formation.

One final point needs to be made. For many Christians, doing traditional apologetics is intimidating enough even without *additional* components to worry about. But the encouraging truth is that simply being aware that there *are* other components goes a long way. For example, one need not be an expert in missiology to recognize that cross-cultural factors may be at play in a person’s belief formation. Or one need not be a psychologist to understand that a person’s emotional reactions to their

past experiences with Christians will impact what they believe about Jesus. Simply having an awareness of the various components of belief formation will make one more effective as they practice apologetics in the real world.

## **Section 2: Implications of the Model**

### ***Timing***

If it is true that information and arguments heard first are better remembered, and if it is true that information and arguments heard first are more likely to become “anchors” (i.e., the lens through which future information and arguments are filtered), then the implication is obvious: a good apologist must do all she can to get to the questioners first, perhaps before the questioner questions at all. This component of belief formation is proven out in essentially every study of Christian conversion, which show that the chances of a person becoming a Christian decline dramatically as they get older (Colbertson, 2023). In other words, early exposure to the gospel and early exposure to basic apologetics makes a massive difference as to whether a person ultimately chooses to follow Jesus. The practical outworking of this is that Christians should be wholly committed to reaching young people (think 3-5 years old) with the gospel and to provide them with basic arguments for God’s existence, the resurrection of Jesus, and other foundational Christian truths. Statistics show that 50% of middle-school and high-school youth say they need factual evidence to support their beliefs (Chamberlain & Price, 2020). This is sobering enough. But the reality is that middle and high school is too late for basic apologetics to be introduced. It should be introduced at the Pre-K and Kindergarten age even if the arguments are extremely rudimentary and basic (“basic” does not mean “bad” or fallacious...the arguments still need to be sound) because the arguments will enjoy a huge advantage over future contrary arguments simply by virtue of the Christian argument being heard first. The timing matters.

Anecdotally, this early exposure approach holds true even in very non-Christian cultures. In Japan, for example, churches are growing by virtue of older Japanese people beginning to show interest

in exploring Christianity because they had exposure to the gospel through Christian pre-school programs that were designed to help them learn English as means of future career advancement. This early exposure to Christian teaching seems to be a common thread in people's later interest in the Christian faith (Inoue & Ito, 2023).

But what happens when the Christian faith does not get there first? What happens when a different worldview enjoys the primacy and anchoring effects? In these cases, perhaps the most important thing for the apologist is simply to remember that these effects are real, and they are powerful. It may not necessarily change any apologetic approach with a particular person, but it may help reduce the apologist's frustration by explaining why a questioner is resistant to what might otherwise be a very compelling *apologia* for the gospel. When an apologist is less frustrated, it is often easier to extend more grace in a relationship, and it can often be that grace-filled relationship that is the key to a successful *apologia*, as I will argue in the next subsection.

### ***Key Relationships***

Relationships are the currency of the Kingdom, and relationships are the necessary context for any sort of communication. Relationships may take the form of regular, familiar interactions with someone face-to-face or maybe a digital relationship where interactions are mainly on-line and on screens or perhaps even a one-way relationship where the author or performer builds a relationship with the viewer such that the viewer feels like "they know" the content creator even though they have never personally interacted. In Chapter 3 Section 3, I argued that there are two key relationships that significantly impact what a person believes or is willing to believe: 1) the relationship one has with the person communicating a particular belief, and 2) the relationship one has with the "tribe" who holds a particular belief. If one wants to make an effective *apologia* for the Christian faith, then it must include relational aspects that permeate these key relationships. At a practical level, the most important relational aspect is trust.

Dr. John Gottman is one of the nation's foremost relationship researchers and is an expert on trust, including his groundbreaking work *The Science of Trust* (Gottman, 2011). Trust, Gottman says, is the belief that someone has one's best interests and welfare in mind. In other words, humans trust those who they think are "for them." In his extensive research, Gottman has found that trust is essential to the flourishing of human relationships and communities and that without it, there are dire consequences for both individuals and societies. As I established in Chapter 3 Section 3, trusting the person who is attempting to persuade someone of a particular belief (Christianity, in this case) is critical to the way that person views the belief. So, at a practical level, how does someone establish trust?

Gottman's argues that trust is established gradually and in small moments, what Gottman calls "sliding door" moments. These are moments in a relationship where one party has the opportunity to turn away from the other party (i.e., to be "against them") or to turn towards them (i.e., to be "for them"). These moments, often small and unnoticed, build momentum over time such that trust is either established or broken. The good news is that Christian apologists can make sure that they are turning "towards" questioners by practicing what Gottman calls "attunement." Attunement can be described as the following:

- A**wareness of emotion;
- T**urning toward the emotion;
- T**olerance of two different viewpoints;
- trying to **U**nderstand;
- N**on-defensive responses;
- and responding with **E**mpathy.

When Christian apologists practice attunement, and therefore when questioners can more readily trust them, they are far more likely to believe what the apologist has to say because people will often only allow their beliefs to be influenced and formed by those they trust. Establishing trust is critical.

The other key relationship that heavily influences belief formation is the relationship that the questioner has with the "tribe" that holds the belief to which they are being called. As was established in

Chapter 3 Section 3, people are very unlikely to believe an idea if they find the tribe that holds that idea to be very unattractive or untrustworthy. In this particular area, apologists can learn much from the field of missiology:

[Missiology] is an interdisciplinary field of enquiry. Missiology originated as the study of Western missions using social sciences to increase their effectiveness. However, the field has grown to include the critical study of the spread and the impact of Christianity—cultural, religious and social...

The chief disciplines used in missiology are theology, history and various social sciences. Missiology overlaps with other theological disciplines, especially practical or pastoral theology, ecclesiology, church history, ethics, spirituality, biblical studies, and topics of systematic or doctrinal theology such as incarnation, salvation, kingdom of God, creation, Christology, trinity, and pneumatology. Missiology includes history of missions, missionary biography, and church history, but history is also important to the discipline in the sense of contextuality. Among the social sciences, the chief interlocutors have been cultural and social anthropology, communication and translation studies, economics and politics—especially business, globalization and development studies, the study of religions and ideologies, and gender, race and diversity studies. (Kim, n.d.)

Unfortunately, apologetics and missiology rarely interact. Perhaps this is because apologists tend to focus more on the abstract world of ideas and philosophies whereas missiologists on the whole tend to focus on that which can be practically implemented. But, fundamentally, these two disciplines share a similar heart and have similar goals, and it would behoove Christian apologists to take advantage of missiological research and tools.

In the particular case of the relationship between unbelievers and the Christian tribe, a helpful tool from the world of missiology is the “P-Scale” (Winter & Koch, 2002). The P-scale represents the cultural distance potential believers must move in order to join a church (i.e., to “fit in with the Christian tribe”). The P-scale runs from P-0 to P-3, with P-0 being the smallest cultural distance and P-3 being the largest cultural distance. Missiologists shape their strategies depending on where a person or group is situated on the P-scale because those at the P-3 level are very unlikely to even listen to the gospel until they move to a lower point on the P-scale. Missiologists move people along the P-scale by seeking to

plant churches that are less culturally distant from the people they are trying to reach. What can apologists learn from this?

Perhaps the biggest takeaway is that in order to make an effective defense of the gospel, a trusted and culturally proximate tribe is just as important, if not more important, than a strong rational argument. Most “deconstruction” stories have nothing to do with someone discovering a new argument against Christianity that wrecks their faith but rather a growing discontent with the Christian tribe with which they once felt aligned (Watson, 2022). And countless testimonies exist of people being “loved into the Kingdom of God” by a healthy Christian tribe (i.e., church) without any arguments being made at all. In other words, relationships are an absolutely valid apologetic. Loving someone well is a defense of the gospel. Building trust is just as important as building a case. Missiologists have been noting this for years as they have sought to move people from various “tribes” to the Christian tribe.

This valuable takeaway from missiology is just one of the myriad ways in which apologetics can learn from this important field. There is currently some scholarship around this integration (Hesselgrave, 2005) but much more work should be done.

### ***Formative Experiences***

It is virtually impossible to counteract experiences with arguments. As I have illustrated earlier, this is because experiences impact parts of the brain that are different than from those impacted by ideas. Indeed, a person’s experiences significantly determine the neural pathways along which beliefs flow. This means that, in the real world, people are more prone to form their beliefs on the basis of their experience rather than to interpret their experiences in light of their beliefs.

On this front, there is bad news and good news. The bad news is that the human brain “records” bad/adverse experiences more easily than good ones (Kensinger, 2009). This means that if someone has a single experience that pushes them away from belief in the gospel, it has a greater impact than a single belief that pushes them toward the gospel. That is bad news.

But the good news is that bad experiences can be overcome. Indeed, researchers have determined that adverse experiences in the past can be “counterbalanced” with positive experiences in the future. Researchers John Gottman and Robert Levenson conducted an extensive study among couples and concluded that it takes five positive interactions to overcome one negative interaction (De Maine, 2017). If Gottman’s research is extrapolated to Christian apologetics, one could say that if a person has an experience that makes them less likely to believe the gospel, that experience can be “negated” if they have five experiences that make them more likely to believe the gospel. In other words, Christian apologists have a high incentive to give questioners positive experiences with the gospel rather than just positive arguments. But what are the practical implications of including experience more prominently in a robust Christian apologetic? Can it be done? Can it be done well? Below are three important areas surrounding experience that deserve attention.

First, if appealing to someone’s personal experience is an important part of Christian apologetics, then working to create the kinds of experiences that lean a person toward faith – and conversely working to minimize experiences that push people away from faith – becomes a viable pre-apologetics strategy. In other words, if the personal experience of God’s beauty in nature plants a seed of faith in human hearts, to which a skilled apologist can appeal when making an *apologia* for the gospel, would it not make sense to give as many people as possible the experience of God’s beauty in nature? Perhaps Christians could work to make sure that beautiful areas and parks are maintained and protected. Perhaps Christians could make sure that the many children living in urban areas who never have the chance to see the Grand Canyon or walk amongst the Redwoods get to see them at least once in their lives. Or if listening to a beautiful symphony or experiencing the sacred sound of Gregorian chant sparks a sense of the Divine in human hearts, would it not make sense to expose as many people as possible to beautiful music, especially in sacred settings? Perhaps Christians could lead the way in



creating this kind of music and bringing it to audiences who currently do not have access to it. The same is true for art or cuisine or many other sorts of things.

Of course, creating these kinds of experiences is only half the challenge. The other half is helping people to rightly interpret what they have just experienced. This is critically important because someone's experience of nature, for example, could just as easily lead to nature worship as it does to worshipping the one true Creator. This is why it is advantageous for Christians to be the ones catalyzing these experiences; it provides an "interpretive advantage" to the Christian apologist because she is more proximate to the situation and can provide an interpretation first. But the other major opportunity is for Christians to consistently be interpreting everyday life experiences in such a way that leans people toward faith. Admittedly, creating faith-affirming experiences is difficult and potentially very expensive and time consuming. Thankfully, though, God graciously provides many experiences throughout an ordinary day that, rightly interpreted, point people to Him. A child being born to a friend or loved one, an act of sacrificial love that defies a naturalistic explanation, or just a burst of gratitude for the smell of fresh coffee in the morning (to Whom does one owe thanks for this pleasure?) are everyday experiences that the apologist can lean into and incorporate into an effective *apologia*. No, these things are not logical syllogisms or philosophical proofs in any real sense, but they are "evidence" (when rightly interpreted) that can be mustered in defense of belief in God and His gospel.

Secondly, another important area of exploration as it relates to experience and apologetics is the medium through which apologetic is communicated. If experience is a valid and powerful component of apologetics, are more experiential mediums preferable (or at least complementary) to those that are less experiential? It would certainly seem that way; logical syllogisms do not quite pack the same emotional punch as a gripping story.

Say, for example, that an apologist wants to deal with the problem of evil. She has several options. She could present a case using deductive logic that shows that the existence of evil does not

and cannot disprove the existence of an all-good and all-powerful God. And her logic would be totally correct. But what if instead she told a creative story that made the same “argument” about evil but through a well-crafted narrative that captivated the audience and gave them a riveting experience of the story. Which would be more effective? The reality is that the “argument” in story form is likely to have a much stronger impact than the argument alone – as powerful as it might be. It would be more memorable and also tap into the more experiential aspects of learning, including emotion and imagination. Alistair McGrath, one of today’s most insightful evidential apologists, makes a strong case for using narrative for Christian apologetics in his excellent book *Narrative Apologetics: Sharing the Relevance, Joy, and Wonder of the Christian Faith*. He writes:

Truth is no guarantor of relevance. Veracity is one thing—indeed, a good thing. Existential traction, however, is something very different. This point is of major significance, in that it raises an important question about the value of what is sometimes called “evidential” apologetics—that is, an enterprise that seeks to use historical evidence or rational argument to establish the truth of Christianity. This might simply prompt the question, “Well maybe that’s true—but so what?” It is indeed important to show that there are good historical and rational grounds for Christian belief. Yet this is, in itself, quite inadequate to demonstrate that Christianity is capable of changing people’s lives, giving them meaning and hope so that they can cope with a deeply puzzling and disturbing world. It presents Christianity as something external that is to be confirmed, not as something internal that is to be experienced. The problem is that evidential apologetics fails to engage or display the existential traction of the Christian faith. To its critics, it seems obsessed with historical detail yet curiously inattentive to “big picture” questions—such as the meaning of life. There is a danger that apologetics becomes fixated on questions about the historical reliability of the Bible and in doing so fails to set out its powerful vision of truth, beauty, and goodness. As I shall demonstrate throughout this work, stories enable us to make meaningful connections between the gospel and lived human experience. We are able to show that the gospel is not merely true but has the capacity to transform lives, truthfully and meaningfully. (McGrath, 2019)

And finally, an area of exploration as it relates to experience and apologetics is the very real opportunity for people to experience God Himself. After all, God is not an abstract set of principles but rather a spiritual Being with personality and presence. Someone’s real and personal experience of God immediately trumps any arguments that He does not exist, no matter how strong or robust those arguments may be. This appeal to a personal experience of God is perhaps one of the most overlooked

aspects of contemporary Christian apologetics. Because modern apologists tend to favor reason, argumentation, and logic (for the various reasons outlined in this paper), there is a tendency to be leery of trying to root objective truth in something that is inherently subjective, like a personal experience of God. But this suspicion is not warranted. Going back to Paul's *apologia* in Acts 26, one sees that his "reasoned defense" of the gospel for which he was on trial was primarily an appeal to his personal experience of God on the road to Damascus. This is critically important. At the time of his conversion, Paul undoubtedly had many intellectual arguments against Jesus being the Messiah. But in one remarkable experiential moment of meeting God, those arguments all disappeared, and he became as convinced of the truth of the gospel as anyone has been in history.

At this point, an important distinction must be made. Paul clearly felt the liberty to appeal to his own personal experience of God as a key foundation for his *apologia* of Christianity. That is important enough, even though he seems to have had minimal success in convincing Festus. The success, or lack thereof, is not the point. The point is simply that he appealed to experience as a part of his *apologia*. But this section's focus is not so much about leveraging one's own personal experience of God (although that is wholly appropriate) but rather giving people their own experience of God, an experience of God that can in one fell swoop counteract and overcome any logical arguments or intellectual reasons for rejecting God and His gospel. This kind of experience with God helps make an *apologia*; it is one incredibly powerful "reason" in an effective "reasoned defense." One biblical example of this is the story of Naaman, who was not a follower of God at the time he encountered Him. As the story goes, through the witness of one of his wife's servants, Naaman is willing to give the God of Israel a chance to heal him. After being miraculously healed by God through bathing in the Jordan River, Naaman declares, "Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel" (1 Kings 5:15). Naaman's personal experience with God was strong enough to bring him to faith in spite of any intellectual (or otherwise) struggles. To the extent that one is willing to at least invite people to experience God through being

healed physically or emotionally or to invite them to experience God by speaking a special word of supernatural insight into their life or some other direct encounter with God, there is potentially a powerful *apologia* in the waiting.

Of course, all of this presupposes a correct theology of these things. God does not guarantee to heal anyone. God does not always give supernatural insight into someone's life. But the point is that an apologist should be sensitive to the moving of the Spirit and at least be open to the possibility that their most powerful apologetic may be something supernatural.

In this section, I have attempted to show that appealing to personal experience is a legitimate tool in the apologist's toolbox. The motivation for exploring this issue is my concern that contemporary apologetics leans too much on logic, argumentation, and reason. This overemphasis on these cerebral aspects of apologetics raises several significant concerns. First, it gives the impression that only those who are more academic, scholarly, or "intellectual" have what it takes to effectively do apologetics. That is terribly unfortunate and hinders a huge number of Christians from exploring ways of making a "reasoned defense" that are more in line with their giftings. Secondly, it keeps apologetics buried away in the theology and philosophy departments of seminaries, which can often be fairly disconnected from the pastoral work that stands on the frontlines of ministry and outreach. If apologetics is seen primarily as a cerebral exercise conducted by theologians and philosophers, then those with a "pastoral heart" are likely to simply pass it by. That too is terribly unfortunate. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Christian apologetics will not be as effective as it could be. As I showed in an earlier section, people simply do not make massively important decisions, or decisions of any significant consequence really, on the sole basis of logic, argumentation, and reason. Humans are experiential beings, not data and fact super computers. If Christian apologists are going to make an effective "reasoned defense" of the gospel, then the appeal must be to more than data, information, logic, reason, and rationale – as important as those things are. Experience counts. Experience matters. Thankfully, God's Word says as

much and gives Christians the freedom, even the commendation, to appeal to one's own personal experiences and to interpret the experiences in the lives of others in such a way that they help bolster an *apologia*, a "reasoned defense" of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

### ***Desirability of Belief***

Humanity's struggle to meaningfully situate itself in the universe is nothing new. For as long as humans have existed, they have longed to find a purpose or cause that explains their existence and gives it meaning. For the vast majority of human history, this meaning has been derived from the belief in a higher power or powers, whether that be the monotheistic God of the Abrahamic religions or the polytheistic gods of the Hindus or Romans and Greeks. This belief in a spiritual realm beyond the material world has provided a "meta-narrative" by which humans have made sense of the universe (Azar, 2010). But in more recent times, particularly in the West as the scientific method was developed and honed, belief in these spiritual powers began to weaken. In the 1500s and 1600s, European thinkers began to suggest that natural laws made the belief in spiritual forces, including God, unnecessary to having a useful "meta-narrative" of the world. Instead of religion, reason and science were determined to give meaning to life and be the arbiters of what is true. When Darwin wrote his book *The Origin of the Species* in 1859, the final piece of the puzzle seemingly fell into place. Science now had a clear explanation for how humans "got here" and spiritual or religious causes were no longer needed. Indeed, if the reasons for needing God were no longer existent then humanity could simply take the final step and admit that God did not exist either.

But along the way from religion to reason, some significant problems emerged. If the spiritual realm, including God, did not actually exist and if the natural evolutionary process that brought about human life was the exact same process that brought about every other kind of life including insects, lower order primates, and even trees, then what ultimate meaning did humanity possess more than these? In addition, philosophers and scientists began to run into the limits of what reason and science

could actually prove to be true. For example, how can it be proven that reason is itself reasonable? And how can one really, truly know anything if science argues that one's body and mind are essentially only material and merely the conglomeration of biological processes including neurons firing in one's head? Furthermore, if the spiritual realities that had often been used as the basis for morality and ethics do not exist, then how are humans to adjudicate between right and wrong? Does morality really exist at all? Or does the group that has the most power simply get to decide what is right and wrong? As humanity began to slowly understand the possible implications of losing its faith in a spiritual world that transcended itself, these questions became known as "the human predicament" – the harsh realization that much of life becomes absurd without a belief in the spiritual realm, including God, to provide a legitimate grounding for ultimate meaning.

Blaise Pascal was one of the first Christian thinkers to address this problem – albeit indirectly. Writing in the early portions of his *Pensées*, Pascal argues not so much that life is *absurd* without God but more that humanity is *miserable* without God. Pascal skillfully uses both "predicaments" (i.e., absurdity and misery) to paint a sobering picture of life lived without God. Pascal bases his argument on the fact that humankind is vastly incapable of fully understanding the extremes of where it began and where it will end. He writes:

For in fact what is man in nature? A Nothing in comparison with the Infinite, an All in comparison with the Nothing, a mean between nothing and everything. Since he is infinitely removed from comprehending the extremes, the end of things and their beginning are hopelessly hidden from him in an impenetrable secret, he is equally incapable of seeing the Nothing from which he was made, and the Infinite in which he is swallowed up.

What will he do then, but perceive the appearance of the middle of things, in an eternal despair of knowing either their beginning or their end. All things proceed from the Nothing, and are borne towards the Infinite. Who will follow these marvelous processes? The Author of these wonders understands them. None other can do so. (Pascal, 2011)

In essence, Pascal is lamenting how little humanity can really know about the world based on human effort and learning. For someone like Pascal with an insatiable intellect and curiosity (especially about math), this is a horrifying and despairing reality. But it is not just the inability to know enough

about key external realities that bothers Pascal. When he looks inward to the soul, he sees an absence of virtue, yet another reason for despair. He laments how humanity often allows a person's appearance to distort how they are respected or disrespected, how humans are subject to "bias" and intense "self-love," and how humans purposefully fill life with "diversions" in order to avoid realizing how despairing their existence really is. In many respects, Pascal reflects the spirit of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. *Life under the sun, if honestly considered, is truly miserable apart from God.* This is part of the "human predicament."

Several hundred years after Pascal, the apologist Francis Schaeffer revisited the "human predicament" in his 1968 book *The God Who is There*. The intellectual climate in which Schaeffer writes is very different than Pascal's. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, atheism had become a respectable and common position to hold. Indeed, at the time *The God Who is There* was first written, a large percentage of the world was under the control of governments who officially rejected God and espoused atheistic communism. In his book, Schaeffer lays out the concept of a "line of despair" that exists in the world of ideas (Schaeffer, 1968). Below the line, truth is unknowable. This would include religious truth, moral truth, and any sort of objective truth about beauty, meaning, and purpose. Schaeffer pins much of the blame for falling below the "line of despair" on philosopher G.W.F. Hegel's rejection of "antithesis," the idea that something cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same sense. Hegel replaced this foundational idea with the idea of "synthesis," or the idea that truth is not found in either A or non-A but in a synthesis of both A and non-A. In essence, his philosophy "relativized all possible positions and led to the concept that truth is to be sought in synthesis rather than antithesis" (Schaeffer, 1968) and therefore made it impossible to know *true truth*. With no way to know true truth any longer, the basis for objective morality, meaning, purpose, beauty, and even statements about God become meaningless because these things are ultimately unknowable. But humankind cannot live authentically without these things. And so once again humanity finds itself in a despairing position – the human predicament -

desperately needing the very things it has no basis or right to believe actually exist. The only solution to this problem, according to Schaeffer, is to reject synthesis and embrace antithesis, including the foundational antithesis: God is there, or he is not. He either exists or he does not. Of course, Schaeffer believed that God exists and by virtue of his existence things like morality, meaning, purpose, and beauty actually do exist and can be known. According to Schaeffer, belief in God allows humanity to climb up above the “line of despair” and make sense of life.

In summary, Blaise Pascal and Francis Schaeffer believed that life is miserable and absurd without God. Indeed, given equal evidence as to whether or not God exists, Pascal argued that a person’s best bet was to believe in God because of the wretched alternative of a miserable and absurd life without God. Apologists would do well to use the approaches of Pascal and Schaeffer to help generate a desire to believe the gospel by showing how unattractive life is without belief in God and the gospel and how desirous and wonderful life is if the gospel is true. After all, it is virtually impossible to convince someone of a belief that they do not want to believe. But it does not take much convincing at all to persuade someone to believe something that they desperately want to be true.

All this to say that apologists should not shy away from uncovering a sense of existential angst in the hearts and minds of their hearers by simply drawing out the conclusions of unbelief to their logical ends. This is not emotional manipulation or manufacturing an existential crisis that is not there; it is simply pointing out that unbelief has tragic and depressing consequences when properly understood. On the contrary, the apologist does well to highlight the beauty and good news of the gospel in contrast to the bad news of unbelief. For example, important aspects of the gospel such as God’s radical love and pursuit of humanity, his stepping into human history in the person of Jesus Christ, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil in the new heaven and the new earth can be just what is needed to compel an unbeliever to desperately desire the gospel to be true.



### ***Strength of Argument/Evidence for the Belief***

There is no shortage of resources that seek to demonstrate through evidence and argumentation that Christianity is true. Indeed, I would suggest that Christian apologists have developed all of the basic arguments necessary to answer the current challenges put forth against the gospel and that they will continue to do so as new challenges emerge. I have absolutely no fear that one day an argument or challenge will emerge to which there is simply no adequate Christian response and the faith “once delivered to the saints” (Jude 1:3) will collapse irreparably forever. So, an implication of my Christian model for belief formation is not really that Christianity needs better arguments and more evidence. Rather, the question explored in this paper is, “Why does the evidence that we do have convince some people and not convince others?” The answer, as I have argued in this dissertation, is that humans do not form their beliefs solely on evidence and reason but rather by a variety of components. But this does not mitigate in any way the importance of having good and sound arguments. What it does, however, is encourage a humbler posture toward what evidence and reason can accomplish. And perhaps in a counterintuitive way, this humility might very well make the arguments and evidence more effective. I see this happening in two important ways: 1) in “setting the bar at the right height” for what apologetics can accomplish and 2) in the individual life of an apologist.

First, when an apologist places too high an importance on the role of arguments and evidence in belief formation, she can often feel undue pressure to use arguments and evidence to do that which they were never meant to do – to “prove Christianity is true,” for example. As I noted in an earlier section, there are both metaphysical and physiological limits to logic. When an apologist understands that arguments and evidence are but one component in a person’s belief formation (and perhaps a relatively small component at that) the goal of apologetics can be far humbler, which actually makes it more likely that apologetics will succeed. For example, if an apologist realizes that five out of the six components of belief formation have nothing to do with logic and arguments, then perhaps the goal of

simply showing that “it is not irrational to believe in Christianity” will suffice instead of feeling the need to “prove that Christianity is true.” Once an apologist clears that relatively low hurdle, she can be content that the other five components (including the Holy Spirit) can carry a person the rest of the way to faith. She need not put excessive pressure on herself to do more with arguments and evidence than is needful because she incorrectly believes that it all “rises and falls” with the strength of her logic. In other words, she has a view of apologetics that is epistemologically humbler.

Secondly, one can see that humility is incredibly important in the life of an apologist because pride, in general, has long been considered one of humanity’s greatest temptations and nemeses. In the Bible, one sees that pride is what got Satan kicked out of heaven (Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28) and one sees it rearing its head at Babel (Genesis 11); one sees pride causing the Jewish religious leaders of Jesus’ day to reject his teaching (Matthew 23) and ultimately send him to the Cross; and one sees pride being condemned over and over by the writers in the New Testament - James 4:6, Philipian 2:3, Romans 12:16, and 1 Corinthians 13:4 among many others. Indeed, there is a consistent strand of thinking throughout Christian history that suggests that pride is the “worst” sin or even the “essence of all sin.” C.S. Lewis captures the overall spirit of this thinking when he writes:

There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others.

According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison. It was through pride that the Devil became the Devil: *Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind* [Italics mine]. (Lewis, 1952, p. 121)

The realm of apologetics is not immune to the sin of pride. Indeed, one could argue that apologetics is particularly vulnerable to it. The reason for this vulnerability is the nature of knowledge itself and what it can do to the human spirit. Writing to the church at Corinth, Paul makes a powerful point about the danger of thinking that one “knows more” than some else. Paul says, “Now about food

sacrificed to idols: We know that ‘We all possess knowledge.’ *But knowledge puffs up while love builds up. Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.* But whoever loves God is known by God [italics mine]” (1 Cor. 8:1-3). One sees here the unfortunate reality that knowledge has the tendency to “puff up” – to make a person proud – and since knowledge is one of the key ingredients to apologetics, if one is not careful, pride can often creep into the very fabric of what an apologist is trying to do. As one modern apologist puts it:

The issue of pride presents a great danger to the Christian apologist. It is quite easy to become pleased with oneself when tearing apart opposing arguments and exemplifying razor-sharp logical skills. The apologist runs the risk of building for himself an idol. This idol is sculpted and carved such that when the masterpiece is complete, they have created for themselves a statue that is a perfect reflection of themselves. If the Christian worships his own mind and its abilities, then he has lost sight of what it means to be a genuine defender of the faith. For such a one, the person has not sanctified Christ as Lord in his heart (1 Peter 3:15). (Ayala, 2017)

This is a poignant reminder of the need for apologists to pursue spiritual formation in the area of humility in order to avoid the trap of pride. This humility will express itself in some very practical ways when using arguments and evidence in support of Christian belief. I will list four of them here.

The first habit in apologetics that helps develop and reinforce humility is being very intentional not to overstate one’s position. As mentioned earlier, this temptation is accentuated when one views apologetics in the “win or lose” category rather than as an outworking of pastoral compassion and *agape* love. *Agape* is one of several Greek words for love. When the word *agape* is used in the Bible, it refers to a pure, willful, sacrificial love that intentionally desires another’s highest good (Roat, 2022). When “winning” is a person’s motive, it is incredibly tempting to overstate their position and understate the position of the questioner. This is often done by giving one’s own particular perspective or argument the benefit of the doubt but requiring the questioner to justify far more about what they assert than one requires of oneself. This is obviously a violation of Jesus’ teaching. Afterall, he said, “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). Do I hold my own positions to the same high standards that I hold someone else’s?

A second way to develop humility is being careful not to overstate one's argument by oversimplifying the issue at hand in order to avoid the nuances that make one's conclusions seem less black and white. This is not to say that certain issues are not black and white; an airtight conclusion is not always the result of overstating things. But it is to say that a person's desire for certainty, and often a person's pride, demands that they conveniently overlook complicating factors (i.e., nuances) that soften their conclusions. This temptation is found in every discipline, including in empirical science (which fancies itself as "above" this sort of thing), but is especially prominent in spiritual matters because these are often tricky issues. It is good for apologists to develop the habit of watching that they are not overstating their case or oversimplifying issues in order to give themselves an advantage. For example, it can be tempting to preface an argument against a skeptic's unconventional position by saying, "No serious scholar today believes [insert X or Y]," when in fact there are serious scholars who believe X or Y. Simply state that X or Y currently goes against the current consensus and leave it at that.

A third way an apologist can develop humility and avoid the pride that can creep into someone's apologetic effort with friends, family, and co-workers is to truly listen to the questioner and not begin to formulate a response to what they assume the person's question is really about. Of course, this tendency violates what the Bible says in Proverbs, "To answer before listening— that is folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13) and, "Fools find no pleasure in understanding but delight in airing their own opinions" (Proverbs 18:2). At the most basic level, demonstrating humility by listening to the questioner means actually listening to them rather than just hearing them. Listening is attentive hearing not just the physical act of receiving and processing sound waves (Gupta, 2023). How many times have we been in conversation with a spouse or children only to be told, "I know you are hearing me, but are you *really listening* to me?" As someone engages in apologetics conversation, it is important that they demonstrate humility in how they truly listen.

At a deeper level, truly listening means getting to “the question behind the question.” It means humbly and lovingly probing deeper into what the questioner means by certain terms or emphases of discussion. Rather than pridefully wanting to share a “great answer” with the questioner to “win” the discussion, humility prompts the apologist to assume the posture of a learner and explore what is happening in the heart and mind of the questioner. I remember one particularly angry skeptic who I had lunch with at the invitation of a friend. The questioner was angry with God, specifically the doctrine of hell. I remember asking him questions about when he started to feel anger towards God. In the course of the conversation, it came out that he had been essentially forced to go up to “receive Christ” at an altar call during one of the first times he attended church with a friend. He said it was terrifying and that he felt incredibly violated. I felt humbled that he had the courage to divulge this information to me, and it gave me the opportunity to empathize with such a terrible experience. Listening, truly listening, which is so rare these days, is a powerful apologetic.

The fourth and final habit to develop that helps nurture and reinforce humility while doing apologetics is the art of admitting one’s own ignorance. There are two important aspects to this. The first is admitting that there are limits to one’s knowledge. This takes humility. After Paul spends a good portion of his letter to the Romans being very specific and clear about his understanding of multiple, very important doctrines, he writes a doxology pulling from Isaiah and Job that exalts God’s transcendence and inscrutability. He writes in Romans 11:33-36,

“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!  
“Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?”  
“Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay them?”  
For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

Paul is essentially admitting that he does not have it all figured out. After all, God's ways are "unsearchable." But the reader should not take Paul's doxology as indicating that he was not confident in what he asserts in Romans. Far from it, Paul is simply saying that there are lots of things that he simply does not know about God. This posture takes humility to admit but is very disarming to those who are asking questions or having doubts.

The second aspect of admitting one's own ignorance is humbly acknowledging that one might be wrong. This is difficult to do because many apologists create a false dichotomy between admitting they could be wrong and having confidence in what they are saying. These are not mutually exclusive at all. Starting a discussion or making a point by saying, "I could be wrong, but..." does not show that a person lacks confidence in what they are about to say. Rather, it demonstrates a genuine openness to true dialog, which is what an apologist expects and hopes from the questioner. If I fully believe that I cannot be wrong and I do not expect the questioner to think that she could be wrong, then I am truly wasting my breath with the discussion. The situation is sadly two people too proud to admit that they could be wrong talking past each other. There is no genuine listening, no pastoral compassion, and no "doing unto others." Again, the humility to admit that one could be wrong does not mean that the person is not fully convinced of what they are saying." After all, Paul says in his letter to Timothy, "That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day" (2 Timothy 1:12). It simply means that one is willing, in humility, to reexamine the basis of one's being fully convinced just as one would hope the questioner is willing.

### ***Spiritual Realities and the Power of Prayer***

In Chapter 4, I laid out the critical importance of acknowledging spiritual realities/warfare in a human's belief formation. I argued that the supernaturalism of groups like the Pentecostals should be synthesized appropriately and carefully into contemporary apologetics. The synthesis for which I am

advocating can perhaps be summed up in this way: Christianity in the West needs to combine a robust apologetic method with a “reasoned Pentecostal mindset.” If this synthesis is to be realized, both “camps” will need to move towards each other in specific ways. I will examine each “camp” in turn, beginning with areas in which traditional apologetics will need to adjust.

For those involved in Christian apologetics, specifically those involved in publishing books and creating academic or training programs for apologists, there simply must be greater attention given to the spiritual realities that Paul outlines in the passages from 2 Corinthians mentioned in Chapter 4. Having read widely at the popular level in Christian apologetics for more than 20 years and now at the doctoral level, I marvel at the scant amount of attention paid to the interaction between the spirit realm and the nature of unbelief. The closest thing that one finds consistently in the apologetics literature comes from pre-suppositional apologists like Cornelius Van Til, who argue that the Holy Spirit’s illumination of the Word must happen before a person is able to believe because humanity is spiritually wrecked as a result of sin (Dulles, 2005). But these apologists often speak of this spiritual reality in more conceptual and theological terms than in terms of the spirit realm (i.e., angels, demons, the devil, etc.). On the whole, in apologetics literature there is extraordinarily little attention paid to spiritual realities, spiritual authority, the forces of darkness and deception, or really much at all outside of rational argumentation. As I have argued, this is simply the result of how Christian apologetics in the West has historically developed. But if apologetics remains so thoroughly rationalistic, it is missing some key realities of unbelief. Accordingly, apologetics training books and courses (including academic programs) should include topics such as praying with spiritual authority, a truly biblical perspective on spiritual beings, and focus on the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. This would be in addition to the standard fare of the historicity of the Bible, evidence for God’s existence, the resurrection, etc.

On the Pentecostal side of things, there needs to be a greater recognition of the various natural means by which God accomplishes supernatural ends. For example, although I am not Pentecostal, I

have spent a good deal of time with Pentecostals. I have observed that whenever they come into opposition with someone who does not believe or maybe even someone who does believe but is struggling with a particular doubt or pressing question, they jump very quickly to spiritual warfare against the “spirit of unbelief” or the “spirit of confusion.” They do not view these spirits as simply concepts or mentalities; they view them as actual demonic or unclean spirits. Consequently, they believe the way to overcome the problem of doubt or confusion is to remove the unclean spirit in the name of Jesus. Right or wrong, this is the supernaturalism with which they view the world. And as much as it may strike non-Pentecostals as simplistic, primitive, and even dangerous, there is more that commends their position in the Bible than most Christians in the West care to admit (Storms, 2021). Their thinking needs to be taken seriously, especially considering the amazing growth and spiritual dynamism they are currently bringing to the Christian church.

But the Pentecostal camp needs to be reminded that when Paul was “greatly distressed” in Athens “to see that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16), he did not run to Mars Hill and begin rebuking the “spirit of idolatry” or the “spirit of polytheism” or “spirit of false religion.” Paul had rebuked spirits elsewhere. But in this case, the Bible says “...so Paul reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks” (Acts 17:17). In other words, the same person (Paul) who had rebuked spirits and performed miracles and the same person who wrote that, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel,” and “The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world,” saw fit to stand and reason with unbelievers, using the best “apologetic methods” he had available to him. In other words, Paul didn’t experience temporary amnesia on Mars Hill and forget that he was engaging in a spiritual battle against the “god of this world.” Rather, he saw that standing to make a robust apologetical (and evangelistic) argument for the gospel was a means by which he could counter the “god of this world” and set the Athenians free from their idol worship. In essence, Paul knew that he was standing on Mars Hill, but in the power and spirit of Elijah on Mt.



Carmel. In order to defeat the false prophets of Baal – in this case the pagan idolatry of Athens – Paul called down “fire from heaven” in the form of a well-articulated argument.

So, what would this synthesis look like? At a high level, it would look like apologetic books and training that include the best of scholarship in history, science, philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics but also a robust understanding of the distinctly spiritual nature of apologetics work, including spiritual realities and principalities. It would look like Pentecostal leaders more readily acknowledging the value and need for academic apologetics, including in Pentecostal/charismatic affiliated seminaries (for example, Oral Roberts currently does not offer any major or minor in Apologetics). The young men and women being raised up in these contexts have a strong background in spiritual realities, but they often are weaker in the disciplines typically associated with apologetics (history, philosophy, science, etc.). Being strong in both “camps” is the goal.

On the ground, the synthesis looks like lay apologists sharing convincing arguments for Christianity with their unbelieving friend but also having the discernment to sense the Holy Spirit telling them to pray for something specific right then and there over their friend – the very thing that the friend needs prayer for but refused to tell anyone about. It looks like a campus apologist making an academically accurate and logically convincing case for miracles contra Hume, but then instead of thinking the job is done, conducting a healing service (for those interested) to see if God might do some miracles that night. After all, the surest way to show miracles are logically possible is simply to perform one and give Jesus credit. The synthesis looks like both vocational and lay apologists spending just as much time on their knees in prayer for an apologetic encounter as they do reading in books, understanding that the apologetic enterprise is as much a spiritual battle as it is an intellectual debate. In short, the synthesis looks like a robust apologetic method combined with a reasoned Pentecostal mindset.

I will close this section by saying that I am encouraged to see some positive movement (albeit still fairly small) towards a synthesis. The work of New Testament scholar Dr. Craig Keener is one example. Keener has strong Pentecostal leanings and has written extensively on miracles. I am beginning to see his work cited by those in the traditional apologetics community such as Lee Strobel in his book *The Case for Miracles: A Journalist Investigates Evidence for the Supernatural* (Strobel, 2018). Twenty years ago, I am doubtful Keener would have been cited, given his unashamed belief that healings and miracles happen today. I am also greatly heartened by the work of Dr. J.P. Moreland, who recently published *A Simple Guide to Experience Miracles: Instruction and Inspiration for Living Supernaturally in Christ*. Dr. Moreland is widely and highly respected in traditional apologetics circles. In the book, he writes this powerful statement:

The primary purpose of this book is to help us flourish as maturing Jesus followers by strengthening the hope, faith, courage, and comfort that come from knowing—not merely believing—that God is real and still performs miracles today. I’m especially writing for those of us in Western cultures who have been raised with a worldview that downplays the reality and existence of the supernatural. I hope that each of us will gain confidence in and awareness of the supernatural realm and learn how to see miraculous interventions in and around our lives. I believe that God wants to see his church experience a renewal of Christian living that flows from a thoughtful, confident, bold acceptance of an explicitly biblically based supernatural Christian worldview. After all, this is our birthright as Christians. (Moreland, 2021, p. 24)

For those of us familiar with traditional apologetics, it is startling to read a paragraph like this coming from someone like Dr. Moreland. He is calling Christians in the West to believe and expect the supernatural. This sentiment is a wonderful and welcome breakthrough from the hyper-rationalism of apologetics into a more balanced synthesis. It is equally encouraging to see that this book has been endorsed by Wayne Grudem, Paul Copan, Gary Habermas, and Josh McDowell (and Lee Strobel and Craig Keener, of course). All of these people are well-known contemporary Christian apologists. Perhaps the Spirit is stirring, and even greater dialogue and synthesis will take place in the years ahead.

I will make one final practical observation about the role of spiritual realities/warfare in Christian apologetic. As I think about apologetics conversations with skeptical family members or

questioning coworkers – or even fellow Christians struggling with doubt – it is critical that apologists not place themselves in the role of the Holy Spirit and think that they are responsible for enlightening and illuminating minds. In the case of a struggling brother or sister in Christ, it is important that one remembers Paul’s prayer in Ephesians 1 for the believers there. Paul told them, “I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people and his incomparably great power for us who believe” (Eph 1:17-19). As often as Paul “contended for the faith” among the churches, he never failed to realize that it would be the Holy Spirit who brought about change, opened minds, and helped resist unbelief. The apologist need not take upon herself the weight of “winning back” a struggling Christian. Rather, she can trust the Holy Spirit to do His work while she simply shows “mercy to those who doubt” (Jude 1:22) through sound reasoning and apologetics. In the case of non-Christians who are skeptical or even hostile to the Christian faith, apologists should rely equally on the Holy Spirit to open hearts and minds. As the Bible states in 2 Corinthians 4:4, “The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” If Christian apologists think the logical precision and persuasive power of their arguments are going to dislodge a spiritual stronghold, they have a rude awakening coming. Only the Holy Spirit can open the eyes of unbelief. The apologist’s job is simply to faithfully and lovingly offer compelling lines of reasoning and evidence that the Holy Spirit can use as He sees fit.

I have already made the case that apologetics must deal with the fact that unbelief, at its core, is a spiritual reality as much as an academic one. This is not to say that the stronghold of unbelief is exclusively a spiritual reality; certainly, the tentacles of unbelief do find footing on real intellectual doubts and questions. This is also not to say that people who have doubts and questions are only trying

to stubbornly throw up faux objections that they know are false in order to justify their willful rebellion. That is too simplistic. Doubts and questions are as real as the people who have them, and they should always be taken as genuine and sincere. But this is to say that at the root of unbelief is spiritual deception, not simply intellectual confusion. The Scriptures are clear that humans, for both good and bad, are being acted on by outside, spiritual agents (Storms, 2021). Just as the Holy Spirit illuminates and enlightens the human mind, so too do the forces of darkness deceive and confuse and manipulate. This important reality makes apologetics as much an act of spiritual warfare as it is an act of academic discussion. Why does this matter? Because certain aspects of spiritual formation feature prominently in successful spiritual warfare. If one does not recognize apologetics in any sort of way as spiritual warfare, then one will be blind to the spiritual formation needed to be successful at it. It is similar to the phenomenon seen in many undergraduate education degree programs where future teachers are heavily taught subject content and only lightly taught classroom management. Of course, being a successful teacher does include mastery of subject content, but success is actually far more a function of how to run a classroom and build relationships with the students because that is fundamentally what teaching is. The same is true of apologetics. Apologetics is fundamentally a unique brand of spiritual warfare. If one is going to do it with excellence, then one must recognize what it is. It is important to realize that unbelievers are not just confused but that they are also deceived. And this leads to one of the most important practical implications of my Christian model for belief formation: the need to pray.

Prayer is the God-ordained means by which his purpose, power, and provision are brought to earth. Jesus taught his followers to pray to God, “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). The Apostle Paul spoke about the power of prayer as it relates to defeating the principalities and powers that he argues elsewhere are deceiving unbelievers (2 Cor. 4:4). In his famous passage about the “armor of God,” Paul writes:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. **For our struggle is not against flesh**

**and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.** Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. **And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.** (Ephesians 6:12-18)

This should be both an encouraging and sobering reminder to the Christian apologist. It is encouraging in the sense that Paul gives assurance that Christians do have a weapon – prayer - with which they can combat the deception of the enemy. Christians are not helpless. But it is sobering in that it provides an important perspective on the limitations of what apologetics can accomplish. Without prayer, apologetics is useless. Why is this so? Because without the Holy Spirit cutting through the spiritual blindness foisted on humanity by the enemy, apologetics will not be able to penetrate into the areas of heart and mind where beliefs are formed and decisions are made. It will be like the seed sown along the path that is immediately snatched up by the enemy. It will have no chance to succeed. This principle can be concisely summed up this way: With prayer, there is no guarantee that apologetics will work. But without prayer, there is a clear guarantee that it will not. Prayerlessness is not an option for the Christian apologist.

But if this is true, why is such little mention made of prayer in apologetics literature? I have already suggested in Chapter 4 that those in the apologetics movement have tended to be more cerebral and logical and even somewhat suspicious of the supernatural. Because prayer is a decidedly supernatural practice, it would make sense then that it may not be the initial impulse of many apologists. But this must change. Going back to the field of missiology, one can observe a significant emphasis on prayer as a response to the impossible challenge of taking the gospel to all nations. Prayer resources abound in the field of missiology such as *Operation World*, *Praying Through the Muslim World*, *Praying Through the Hindu World*, and the Joshua Project. Where are all the prayer resources

focused on apologetics? There appears to be a different mentality in the field of apologetics than in the field of missiology. But no model of Christian belief formation could possibly be correct without acknowledging the biblical truth that we “wrestle not against flesh and blood.” To repeat the point: With prayer, there is no guarantee that apologetics will work. But without prayer, there is a clear guarantee that it will not.

## Chapter 6: Future Research Needed

### Component Coefficients and Dynamics

The model I have outlined in this paper argues for six components of belief formation – five of them are sociological/psychological in nature and one of them is a theological framework that encircles the other five. While identifying the six components is helpful, it would also be extremely helpful to know how the various components interact with one another. For example, is there one of the five sociological/psychological components that has greater influence than all of the others? Or are all of the components equally important? In other words, do the components have coefficients that might indicate their relative importance vis a vis the others? These coefficients could be determined by doing a regression analysis based on a well-structured survey that somehow incorporated the five sociological/psychological components into questions about what a person believes and how they arrived at those beliefs. A regression analysis is:

Regression analysis is a statistical method. It's used for analyzing different factors that might influence an objective – such as the success of a product launch, business growth, a new marketing campaign – and determining which factors are important and which ones can be ignored.

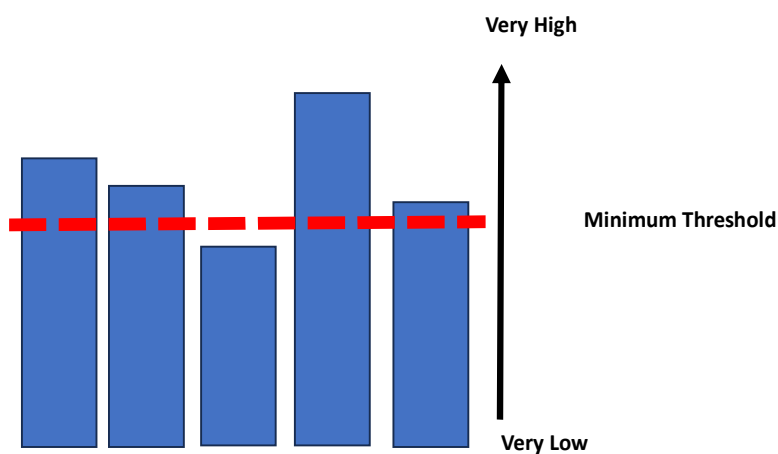
Regression analysis can also help leaders understand how different variables impact each other and what the outcomes are. For example, when forecasting financial performance, regression analysis can help leaders determine how changes in the business can influence revenue or expenses in the future. (Qualtrics, 2023)

In the survey, it would be important that the five sociological/psychological components not be explicitly identified. This is because people often want to present themselves as “objective” and “logical” in their belief formation because of the high value that society places on these virtues when it comes to decision making. In other words, humans want to think that they are more objective and logical than they actually are (Clearer Thinking, 2015). The survey would need to probe beneath the surface of initial responses to identify all of the components at play. For example, while a person may initially say that they do not believe in God because “evolution proves he doesn't exist,” it might be discovered later in

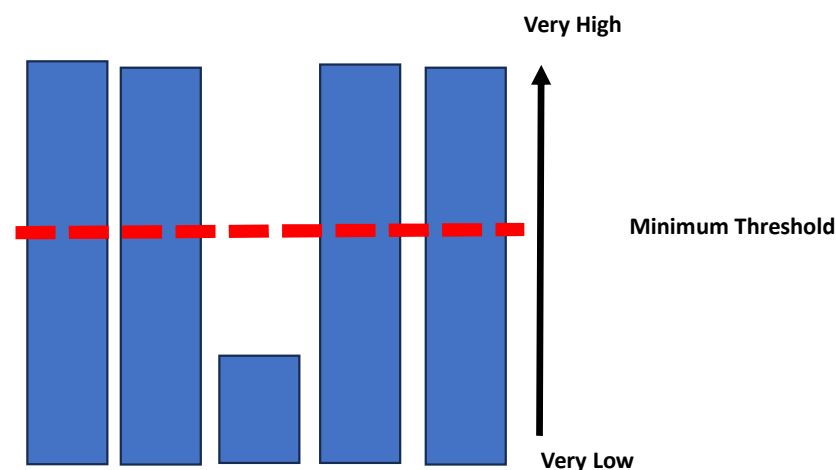
the survey that the person had multiple, bad experiences with a hypocritical Christian neighbor. So, there could be some upside in using interviews versus surveys (Aacha & Chetty, 2022).

Another important aspect of the model to research would be whether there is a “minimum threshold” that each of the components must have in order for a person to embrace a particular belief or if an extremely high score in one of the components can “compensate” for a deficiency in a different component such that even if one or more components do not meet the minimum threshold, a person might still embrace a particular belief. This important distinction is visually illustrated below:

***Minimum Threshold Dynamic (1) – The person does not believe because one of the components is not high enough even though the others are all high enough.***

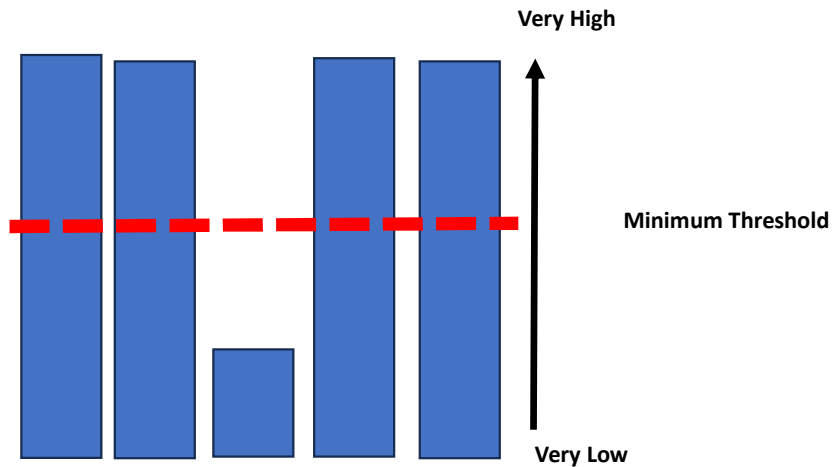


***Minimum Threshold Dynamic (2) – The person still does not believe because one of the components is not high enough even though all the others are all very high.***

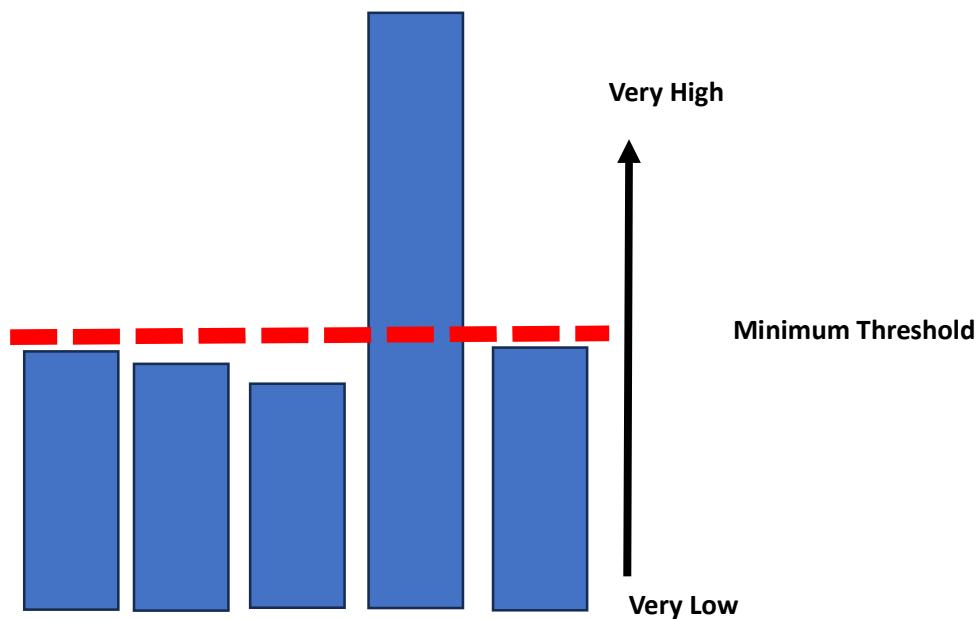




***Compensation Dynamic (1) – The person does believe because the very high components “make up for” the one that is below the minimum threshold.***



***Compensation Dynamic (2) – The person does believe because, although all but one of them is below the minimum threshold, the strongest component is strong enough to “make up for all the others.”***



The reason this further research is important is clear. Depending on which of these dynamics holds (or some other dynamic or variety of dynamics), the apologist would need to adjust her approach accordingly to either 1) bring all components up to a minimum threshold or 2) to potentially hyperfocus on one of the components that she feels can be strong enough to make up for gaps in the others. Admittedly, it would be nearly impossible to ascertain via surveys the required data to discern which dynamic holds. But perhaps through well-structured interviews, the data could be gathered.

The point in all of this is to say that determining the coefficients on the components and how the components interact with one another to bring about belief (or not) would be an extremely valuable exercise beyond the scope of this dissertation. And perhaps in the course of gathering the data, a different component that has been heretofore overlooked will emerge. But, in any case, having a robust Christian model of belief formation that gives researchers good guidance about what to be looking for is very valuable in and of itself.

### ***Personality Type***

Another important area of future research would be to explore how personality types impact the various coefficients and interactions of the components. In the last 60 years, there has been explosive growth in the “personality test” industry (Harrell, 2017). Although some scholars take issue with how helpful personality tests actually are, there is no doubt that the commercial success of these various tests has brought heightened awareness of the impact that personality plays on how humans live and interact. The American Psychological Association defines personality as:

Personality refers to the enduring characteristics and behavior that comprise a person’s unique adjustment to life, including major traits, interests, drives, values, self-concept, abilities, and emotional patterns. Various theories explain the structure and development of personality in different ways, but all agree that personality helps determine behavior.

The field of personality psychology studies the nature and definition of personality as well as its development, structure and trait constructs, dynamic processes, variations (with emphasis on enduring and stable individual differences), and maladaptive forms. (APA, 2018)

At a high level, there is some analysis that suggests a person's personality type may impact their proclivity to be more "believing" versus more "skeptical." But that is much different than saying that personality type impacts how a person comes to believe what they believe. Perhaps personality type impacts the starting point of the belief formation process even though the process itself is the same for everyone. It would truly be a fascinating research project to look at my five sociological/psychological components of belief formation through the lens of personality. One potential way to do this would be to run all survey or interview participants through a simple personality test before having them take a survey or join an interview. That way, responses could be categorized according to personality type to see if patterns or trends emerge regarding how a person comes to believe things.

### ***Belief Type***

Still another area of future research would be to determine if the model changes at all based on the specific kind of belief that a person is considering. For example, does it appear that people form inconsequential beliefs differently than they form beliefs that have major consequences or do beliefs with major consequences simply have higher minimum thresholds to hit across the various components than lower consequence beliefs? There is some early research being done in this area (Travers, 2022) and it certainly will continue. The results of this future research will be very important for Christian apologists to know because there may be no higher-consequence decision than choosing a religion or worldview. If the import of a belief changes how people come to form that belief, it would be extremely helpful for a Christian apologist to understand how that mechanism works.

### ***Cross-cultural applicability***

Another area of future research would be to analyze how cultural differences may impact my Christian model of belief formation, if at all. Would non-Western cultures have different components? Or would the components remain the same but simply with different coefficients and perhaps with different

dynamics? A growing body of research indicates that culture plays a more important role in how humans view the world than was thought in the past (Turnbough, 2013).

Cross-cultural applicability would be yet another area where apologists could learn from missiologists. Assuming that cultural differences do impact the model in some way, missiologists could be very helpful in building out a Christian model of belief formation that works effectively for a specific cultural background. This is sometimes called “culture mapping” and serves to help missionaries understand the best way to evangelize those they hope to reach. Culture mapping can be explained this way:

When an iceberg floats on water, ten percent rises above the surface visible to the naked eye while the remaining ninety percent hides submerged below sea level. Without sonar equipment, the seafarer cannot realize the iceberg’s girth or understand its nature. Culture resembles an iceberg in appearance, dimension, and attributes. Edward Hall in his seminal work *Beyond Culture* (1976) likened a society’s culture to an iceberg with some aspects visible above the water and larger hidden beneath the surface. He labeled the external aspects of the cultural iceberg as surface culture and the internal as hidden culture. Based on the premises of Hall’s surface and hidden cultures, a cultural landscape map of a given population guides the ministry practitioner across the wide-ranging effects of the two composite cultures. (Paron, 2021)

Perhaps by viewing “cultural landscape maps” for various non-Western cultures, researchers could make an informed guess as to how accurately my Christian model of belief formation would hold in a particular culture, if at all. In any case, it does seem like a model that is more integrative in its defense of the Christian faith would have higher applicability than a model that is more monolithic, such as contemporary apologetics seems to be.

### ***Age and Generation***

One final area of future research could examine the model’s applicability across various generations when controlling for the cultural variable (i.e. various ages of people within the same culture). Research indicates that generational differences in thought processes, beliefs, and attitudes are real (Pace, 2022). Indeed, apologists like Sean McDowell are leaning into generational differences to shape how they communicate the gospel (McDowell, 2009). Understanding if generational differences

impact how people form their beliefs and to what extent could be incredibly valuable research to undertake.

All of these suggested areas of future research depend on the ability to gather and analyze data. In the same way, it would be wonderful to gather the necessary data to test the overall validity of the six components of my Christian model of belief formation in the first place. But I acknowledge that gathering the necessary data would be a massive undertaking. In the meantime, however, the model could be used by individual apologists or groups of apologists to see if it improves their overall effectiveness and impact. Putting the model to use and then generating case studies would be another great way to validate the model.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

In this dissertation, I have put forth a Christian model of belief formation in the hopes that my model will help improve the overall effectiveness of Christian apologetics. My model consisted of five sociological/psychological components (timing, key relationships, formative experiences, desirability of belief, and strength of arguments/evidence) and one theological component (spiritual realities).

Regarding the sociological/psychological components, I argued that leveraging psychology and neurobiology is allowable and desirable because these fields, when rightly understood, are no threat to the Christian faith.

My dissertation was motivated by the fact that the same apologetical argument made at the same time in the same way to different people may be accepted by one but totally rejected by the other. Why? After all, it is the exact same argument. My hunch was that there were components at play beyond logic and argumentation in how a person comes to believe something. I demonstrated the validity of my hunch by documenting the inherent limits of logic and rationality – both epistemologically and physiologically – and then by identifying the components of belief formation mentioned in the paragraph above. Acknowledging the limits of logic and acknowledging the presence of other components is important because contemporary apologetics tends to overemphasize logic and rationality, which I demonstrated by giving a brief history of apologetics.

Throughout the dissertation, I highlighted a sixth component of belief formation that made the model distinctly Christian: spiritual realities. I argued that this critical component of belief formation is often overlooked in contemporary apologetics and recommended that it be rectified as quickly as possible.

Once I established my Christian model of belief formation, I outlined some practical implications of the model and made suggestions for ways apologetic approaches could be improved. These included making sure that apologists are giving children early exposure to the gospel and to apologetics because

the arguments that “get there first” have an advantage due to the “primacy effect” and the “anchoring effect.” I argued that an apologist’s relationship with a questioner must be built on trust if the apologist is to get a fair hearing. I also argued that one’s perception of the “Christian tribe” is essential to whether that person is willing or unwilling to believe the gospel. I suggested that Christian apologists could learn from missiologists about reducing the cultural distance between questioners and the Christian tribe, making it more likely that the questioner will be open to accepting the beliefs held by that tribe.

Regarding formative experiences, I made the case that a strong Christian apologetic must include an appeal to experience because experiences are crucial to belief formation. I suggested that Christian apologists find ways to create experiences that can draw people to God and counteract negative experience they may have had with God or Christians. I also suggested that apologists use experiential communication, such as stories, to share the gospel and encouraged apologists to be open to being the means through which a questioner experiences God Himself. And because humans are hardwired to more readily believe things they want to believe, I encouraged the use of the “existential argument for God” to create a hunger within people to believe in God.

Even though the thrust of my dissertation is that contemporary apologetics is too heavily reliant on logic, I acknowledged throughout my dissertation that logic, argumentation, and rationality really do matter. I also claimed, however, that Christianity already has plenty of good arguments in defense of the gospel. What is needed is a better understanding of the role of those arguments within a holistic approach to apologetics. I suggested that a more holistic model like I am proffering here “takes the pressure off” of the apologist’s arguments, which allows for less grandiose claims about Christian evidence and engenders greater humility. This humility should be expressed in the apologist’s personal interactions with questioners and in what is expected of apologetics overall. As was mentioned, because five of the six components of belief formation have nothing to do with arguments, perhaps the goal of simply showing that “it is not irrational to believe in Christianity” will suffice instead of feeling the need

to “prove that Christianity is true.” Finally, I emphasized the importance of prayer to Christian apologetics and recommended that specific prayer resources be developed. This is another area in which apologetics could learn from missiology. I argued that it is *impossible* for apologetics to succeed without prayer because the spiritual realities component of the model encircles all the others, and prayer is the supernatural means by which the Holy Spirit can break through spiritual deception. A good *apologia* starts and ends with prayer.

In Chapter 6, I explored some key areas of future research that are needed. These areas included using surveys and interviews to determine the coefficients of each of the sociological/psychological components. I suggested that perhaps a regression analysis could be run on the data to produce those coefficients. Additionally, I discussed the need for future research regarding how the components interact. I wondered if a person would believe something only if all of the components met some sort of minimum threshold (what I called a “minimum threshold dynamic”) or if the strength of one component could “make up” for the weakness of another component or components (what I called a “compensation dynamic”). I graphically represented the various dynamics for the sake of clarity.

I also explored the question of how personality type might impact the model and whether various kinds of beliefs are formed differently – for example, beliefs that have huge consequences versus beliefs that are inconsequential. Finally, I explored the question of whether different cultures and generations might have different models of belief formation and suggested that apologists could learn from missiologists about the enterprise of “cultural landscape mapping.”

As I conclude this dissertation, I would like to point out that the various strands of my model, when taken together, strongly commend two aspects of the Christian faith: compassion and worship. As I have previously argued, apologetics in some key ways is a unique brand of spiritual warfare. But it is not only spiritual warfare; it is also an act of compassion. This contradicts the often-held perception that



apologetics is about winning this or that argument. While being logically sound and persuasive does help with apologetics, “winning” arguments or debates is not the goal. The conclusion of the matter is that Christians are actually called to “win” people. Imagine a pastor sitting down with a struggling parishioner who has just received a difficult diagnosis. Imagine that pastor attempting to make a case from the Bible that the parishioner should remain encouraged about life because of Christ’s victory on the Cross. And now imagine that the pastor views the situation as “winning” if she can convince the parishioner to be encouraged and as “losing” if the parishioner is discouraged. This is a fundamental category mistake. The conversation between them is not a matter of winning or losing but rather of the pastor seeking to demonstrate the love of Christ to a person in need. The same category mistake is often made when doing apologetics. The goal is not to win or lose but rather to show compassion to someone who is confused by lovingly using logic and argumentation. Although some may perceive logic and argumentation as blunt tools, they can actually be quite beautiful and delicate when used with the proper motive – *agape* love. For this reason, it is imperative that the apologetics enterprise never be cast in terms of winning and losing but rather in terms of how effectively one wields the apologetics tools at their disposal to show compassion to the questioner. I remember interacting with a young lady who was struggling with some theological questions. The questions were prompted by an incredibly tragic situation wherein her older sister had recently died during childbirth. Because I knew the situation, I was particularly sensitive not to dive into theology right away. But apologists need to remember that everyone they are talking to is struggling or hurting in some way. Compassion should be an apologist’s first posture toward unbelief and questions. Confrontation should be a far secondary posture.

Finally, when drawn together, the various components of my Christian model of belief formation point the apologist towards worship. Spending time in intentional worship of the one, true Creator God who has revealed Himself in the person of Jesus Christ is mission critical to successful

apologetics and therefore ought to be a focus. Why worship? Because as I have shown, apologetics is a decidedly spiritual undertaking, drawing on the power of the Holy Spirit to combat spiritual realities of confusion and deception, and to reflect the *agape* love that characterizes God by lovingly and humbly using the tools of logic and persuasion to show pastoral compassion to those who doubt or are skeptical. In other words, apologetics is not primarily academic or intellectual. It is spiritual, and as such, worship is the key to any sort of spiritual authority or effectiveness. Indeed, when one views her apologetics efforts – and especially the hard work she invests in reading and studying - as an act of worship rather than academic preparation, it infuses this often-difficult work with a joy and spiritual momentum that can, often in itself, be an attraction to an unbeliever. I remember once in college having a non-Christian friend who, after having some long conversation about a Christian topic (I cannot remember what it was), look at me with big eyes and say with amazement, “You really believe this stuff, don’t you? Wow.” He did not say that because I was so persuasive (at least I do not recall that being the case). He said it because I was talking about it with excitement, with joy, with enthusiasm. As I see it, being “ready to give an answer” (1 Peter 3:15) is an act of worship. It is not some dusty and dry academic pursuit. Apologetics is giving ourselves fully to the cause of Christ. As Paul says in Romans 12:1, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies [including our minds] as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. [brackets mine].” God is worthy!

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## Appendix: Resources on Various Approaches to Apologetics

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